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OR,

TRACKING THE DODGER

FROM

New York to New Orleans.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

FRANK WAS QUICKLY HUSTLED FROM THE TRAIN.

Flipper Frank's Flush :

OR,

Tracking the Dodger from New York to New Orleans.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

CHAPTER I.

A BOY'S BRAVE DEED.

THE flames leaped like fiery serpents into the air, writhing and hissing. It seemed as if they would set the very sky on fire, so virulently did they shoot upward, while the burning mass from which they came glowed like a fiery furnace seven times heated.

It was a well-known New York hotel which was thus being converted into smoke and ashes, a tinder-box through which the flames ran riot, and whose inmates were in imminent danger of a horrible death.

Some had already been dashed to death by leaping wildly from the windows. Others had fallen into the gulf of fire within. The flames had seized on stairs and elevator, and cut off flight by the usual channels of escape. The firemen were busy with ladders, bearing whom they could from the windows; while the puffing engines were pouring hopeless streams of water into the blazing mass.

Few of the guests had been able to save their valuables. Most of them fled in their night-clothes, not even taking time to snatch up a garment of defense against the sharp air of the wintry night.

Various were their exclamations of horror and dismay. One gentleman, who had just been helped down the ladder from a third-story window by a burly fireman, with only a night-shirt to protect him from the biting wind, broke from the hands of his savior with a bitter lamentation.

"All is gone! All!" he moaned. "My papers—my money—my all! Fifty thousand dollars swept up by those terrible flames! All gone!—all! And ruin is my lot."

He wrung his hands like one in the deepest despair.

The bystanders listened with sudden interest. Fifty thousand dollars! Papers, probably of great value. A hundred eyes were turned upward to the window from which the man had descended, and against which the ladder still stood.

Not flames were bursting from the upper portion of the sash. It was hopeless. Who would risk his life to save this man's wealth? His own life had been preserved, and that must be enough.

"Come," said the rough but kind-hearted fireman who had rescued him. "Don't mind that. You ought to be glad you're alive. Come out of this, before you freeze into an icicle."

He led the man away—still wringing his hands, and bitterly bemoaning his losses.

"Poor devil," said one of the firemen, "it is hard. Takes no small scratching to get together such a pile. Hang me, if I wouldn't go for it, but—"

He looked upward and shook his head.

"Shoot me if I ain't going for it!" cried a youthful voice beside him, and a boy, not yet grown to the size of manhood, sprung from the crowd and onto the ladder, up which he went with the agility of a monkey.

The daring act was witnessed by hundreds of people, all of whose eyes were fixed intently on the lad. The cool heads among them called to him to return, but others excitedly cheered him on.

The young acrobat seemed as if he had been born to the ladder. Heedless of the cries below him, he ran up it like a cat, and almost before two breaths could be drawn, was at the window, at which the heat was so great that the top of the ladder was already beginning to blaze.

He paused a moment at the cavernous opening, out of which the light shone blindingly. It seemed to those below that he was shrinking from a hopeless task.

"Back! back!" they cried. "Come down! It is death to venture!"

The daring boy's only reply was to tear off his coat, wrap it round his head, and dash with a wild leap into the room—at the same moment that a stream of water, directed by the hand of a wide-awake hoseman, struck him and drenched him from head to foot.

In situations like this seconds become minutes, minutes become hours. The eyes of hundreds of spectators were fixed on that window, in eager expectation, the daring feat of the boy

having drawn their attention from the thrilling scenes that were taking place at half the windows of the burning building.

Not sixty seconds had elapsed, but they seemed to the strained attention of the observers like almost as many minutes, when the form of the boy again appeared at the window, framed in a brilliant background of flames.

His coat was blazing, but the stream of water which met him full in the face quickly extinguished it, and again drenched him. The blaze which had taken hold of the ladder was also extinguished.

At a wave of his hand the stream was turned away, and he sprung again upon the ladder, down which he ran as nimbly as two feet and one hand could carry him.—The other hand seemed engaged in grasping some object.

A wild shout of congratulation arose as he reached the ground—still holding the object to his breast.

"Brave fellow!—Are you safe?—Are you hurt?" were the cries that surrounded him.

"I s'pose I'd been a cinder now if that sensible somebody hadn't turned the water on," he replied. "Hot up there?—hot ain't no word for it! That water jumped into steam. But, it lasted long enough to help me through."

Hardly had his foot left the ladder before two firemen seized it, and shifted it to another window at which a human form had just appeared.

This new incident took the attention of most of the people from the lad.

"I reckon that man, whatever his name is, owes me a new coat, and some plaster for scorches," he coolly remarked. "I've captured the box that I s'pose holds his spondulicks."

He now displayed the object which he had clasped so closely. It was a mahogany casket, inlaid with what seemed silver, which formed a curved border round the lid, and in its center the letters J. P. C.

"Who's to take care of this?" asked the boy, looking round him. "I ain't to be trusted with so much wealth. Couldn't keep my fingers from investing. Where's the man as owns it?"

"He's been taken away to a warm quarter," answered a policeman, who stood near. "Give me the box. I will take care of it till he shows up again."

The boy—one of the sharpest of the sharp kind they grow in New York—looked up into the policeman's face with eyes that seemed to pierce through him.

"I reckon not, Johnny," he answered. "I boss this job yet. Come over here to Tommy Brown's shebang, on the avenue, and we'll take a peep inside—for the box has got the key in it. Then, I judge, Tommy will be a safe hand to hold it."

The policeman made no objection, and in a few minutes he and the boy, with a group of the spectators, found themselves within an all-night restaurant of the neighborhood.

Very few minutes sufficed to complete the task which had brought them there. The box, which, as the boy had said, had the key in it, was thrown open and its contents quickly examined.

To the surprise, and somewhat to the disappointment, of the onlookers, no money was found in it. It was half-filled with papers, but among these was not a coin and no vestige of a bank-note.

"You've missed the pile, boy," said the policeman, with a laugh. "Hit the wrong package. Didn't look far enough."

"Look far enough!" cried the boy, indignantly. "I saw what looked like hell-fire—and I reckon that was far enough. A feller don't look far in a blaze like that. Nor I don't swallow your idear, nobow. 'Twixt you and me I've a notion that Mr. J. P. C. is a fake. He's trying to put up a job for something or other. I'd sooner see his money than hear tell of it. Hadn't we best look through them papers?"

"No," said Tommy Brown, as the boy had called the restaurant-keeper. "Hands off them papers! You've put this in my care, and this is my way."

He closed the box, locked it, took out the key, and handed it to the policeman.

"You keep that. I'll keep the box. We've got no right to meddle with this man's papers. You be on hand to-morrow with the key. He'll turn up by that time, and we can pass over his property. As for you, young man, you come round, too. No doubt he'll reward you—as he ought to."

"Bless your heart, I don't want no reward!" answered the boy heartily. "If I'd saved the chap his fifty thousand, things'd been different—if he had 'em, which I don't take for gospel."

He shook his head and walked away, with an air as if he took no further interest in the affair.

"A mighty sharp-cut and smart youngster that," said the policeman, with a nod of his head toward the gamin.

"A regular Bowery blossom," answered the restaurant-keeper. "That boy knows enough now to set up a Wall street broker. The man that shuts up his eyes has got to use a big plaster."

Meanwhile the youthful hero had left the restaurant and was walking back toward the fire, whistling as he went. For some reason he seemed in high good humor with himself, for he broke now and then into little ripples of laughter.

"Got the notion in my noddle that there's fun ahead," he said to himself. "Wait until I see Dick and unload my bag of news. I bet he turns back his eyelids. I thought, somehow, I'd seen that chap before; but the J. P. C. nails it. If there ain't pancakes on the fire then I don't know beans."

By the time the boy again reached the locality of the fire, it had passed its most interesting stage. All had been saved that could be, and the flames were now masters of the whole edifice. How many victims had fallen into their awful gulf would perhaps never be known.

In less than half an hour more the floors had all fallen in, and the walls were tumbling—every fall sending up a great shower of sparks and flames into the sky. The firemen were directing all their efforts to save the surrounding property—the hotel being far past saving.

Leaving the locality, the lad strolled away toward his home, still whistling gayly as he went, and occasionally, as before, breaking out into a laugh. He evidently felt highly pleased with his night's work.

The home of the youth whose adventures we have followed to this point was in one of the most modest sections of the great metropolis. Small as the house was, several families occupied it, but he and his mother—who constituted the family—were rich enough to have three rooms to themselves.

On reaching his own very small, but cozy bedroom, the youth unbuttoned his coat, which he had kept tightly buttoned ever since leaving the ladder, and threw open his high-buttoned vest. As he did so, a bulky package fell out and dropped on the table!

"Tommy Brown's got the box, but he ain't got the whole job," avowed the lad, with a grin of contentment. "This 'coon ain't quite as green as a jay-bird, nary time. I didn't climb up that ladder and jump into that fire so's I could play a Sunday School softy when I came down. Not much! I don't believe there's any fifty thousand in this, 'cause that fifty thousand is a fake; but it's my notion it's got something in it that'll 'most make Dick Wister stand on his head and kick his heels into the air. I've got it in my noddle that I've opened out a mighty promising trail to-night; and I'm going on it to-morrow 'fore the sun gets hot."

Ten minutes afterward the boy was in bed and fast asleep, not kept a moment awake by the fact that his face smarted and burned from the scorching it had got from the flames.

CHAPTER II.

AN EYE-OPENER.

MR. RICHARD WISTER, detective, sat in his office reading the morning paper. He was in his easiest attitude, with one foot on the table, the other on a chair, and his own easy-chair tilted well back. From the pipe in his mouth puffs of smoke came as regularly as from a locomotive.

In an opposite corner of the room, diligently employed in cleaning his shoes, which were covered with patches of mud, was his good-looking, well-got-up, neatly-dressed, and wide-awake apprentice, Frank Melton, known as Detective Frank.

"By Jove, that wasn't no slow go of a fire—that hotel blaze!" cried the detective, taking the pipe from his lips. "And thirty or forty poor wretches gone under, it seems." He read on. "The firemen did their duty bravely. Some mighty daring acts. Here's a bit now—d'ye hear, Frank?"

"I'm a-listening," answered the other, indifferently.

"A daring young fool of a boy:—to run up a ladder, and jump into a furnace to save money for a man who hadn't the wit to save his own!"

"Hadn't none to save," growled Frank, now polishing briskly on his right foot-covering.

"What's that?"
"The feller hadn't enough ducats to make a plaster for a wart," averred Frank, now directing his attention to his left foot.

"What the blazes do you know about it?"
"I was there; that's all."

"You there? I might have known that, though. You're everywhere, you Bowery rat. But, the paper says the boy came out alive, with a box under his arm, and left it in safe keeping. How do you know there was no money in it?"

"There weren't nothin' but papers. I took a squint to the bottom."

"Why you—sun-downer! Drop that brush and stand up and face me. See here, Frank, were you—"

"Don't you say nothin' more 'bout that boy, or you'll make me proud and sassy," rejoined Frank, rubbing away more briskly than ever.

"I might have known it," said Dick to himself. "There's no deviltry the young rascal's not in. Tell you what it is, Frank," he cried, dropping his paper and starting up, "there's been enough of this. I'll have no more of it. If you go and make a ghost of yourself, what's to become of the smartest young ferret in New York? If you try any more such risks, you dog, I'll take a cart-whip to your hide."

"See here, Dick Wister, answered Frank, dropping the brush and facing him. "Don't you begin now buying me for a fool, 'cept you've got a big pile of greenbacks to waste. I didn't jump into that fire for a lark, nary time. And, if I ain't badly sold, I'm in on the biggest thing that's been scratched up for a year."

"The deuce you are!"

"The coon lied wholesale! He didn't have no more money in his room than I've got in my pocket—and if peanuts was selling at a cent a grab, I couldn't buy a shell. The fellow's working a job of some sort, and he's built that lie out of wind to help him out. But, that's only the beginning. Who do you guess he was?"

"I'd say General Washington, only he's dead. I can't think of anybody else," answered Dick.

"What do you think of the Artful Dodger?"

"The devil!"

Dick kicked over his chair, this time, in his surprise.

"If it ain't him it's his brother. I didn't climb that ladder for no lark, I tell you. When the feller was bellowing like a bull-calf 'bout his money, I twigg'd his face, and jumped three feet. That's what took me up the ladder. All I've got to say is, that the box I brought down had those letters on it: J. P. C."

"John P. Clarkson!" exclaimed Dick.

"It looks amazing that way."

"You left that box to be called for?"

"Yes, with Tommy Brown, of the Seafoam Restaurant."

Dick hastily thrust on his hat and seized his overcoat.

"You rascally long-winded jackanapes!" he growled. "Why didn't you tell me this before daybreak? If it is the Dodger our cake's all dough. He's been after that box two hours ago.—Come, you monkey, snatch your hat and get ready to fly."

"I don't see no such hurry," rejoined the boy in his easiest manner.

"You don't, eh?" Dick bent his eyes on him sharply. "Ha! what is it?—You confounded retailer of news, you've got something else in your bag!"

"You bet!" answered Frank, seating himself quietly.

Dick flung his overcoat on a chair-back, tossed his hat on the table, and dropped again into his chair.

"Out with it!" he ordered. "No more of your squirrel tricks, you cub."

"This is it," answered the grinning boy, as he drew a paper parcel from under his vest. "I wasn't quite green enough to give Tommy Brown the whole biz. Kept a little memento for myself."

"You're a jewel, Frank!"

"Dunno 'bout that; but I ain't no fool."

Dick seized the package, which was made of stiff wrapping-paper, neatly folded and securely tied. He turned it over. On it was written in a plain hand:

"JACOB P. CONVERSE."

"So; is that your J. P. C.? I hope you haven't found a mare's nest."

"I reckon you don't think the Dodger's carrying his own name—after footing it from the police, and getting a cool thousand put on his head?"

"Hardly," answered Dick. "But—there's a merchant named Jacob P. Converse in this city. If—" he ceased speaking, being now occupied in

carefully untying the package. For reasons of his own he preferred not to cut the string.

While he is thus engaged we may as well relate a fragment of previous history, of much importance to our story.

A year before, Dick Wister and his apprentice had been engaged in an interesting bit of detective work, which ended in the unearthing of a gang of counterfeiters, of whom the leading spirit was a man named John P. Clarkson—a keen rogue, who had so long eluded the police that they had complimented him with the title of "The Artful Dodger."

He proved himself to be worthy of the title. He was tried, and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment as a counterfeiter. Yet, by a very shrewd trick, he managed to escape the hands of the police. He had since been sought for, far and wide, the State offering a reward of a thousand dollars for his apprehension; yet he was still at large, and the search for him had been almost given up as useless.

Under these circumstances, Dick Wister's interest in the boy's communication is not to be wondered at. There was an unusual nervousness in his fingers as he sought to untie the strings, which doubled the difficulty of the job.

"Hang that knot!—By Jove, boy, if you've struck the Dodger's trail—Ha! that's it." The knot yielded. "There's a thousand in this, sure enough, but there's glory and reputation worth ten thousand more. Can the Dodger have been masquerading here under our noses as a business man? He's sharp enough for it."

The string was now loose. He threw it aside, and turning the package over, carefully unfolded it.

Frank looked on with intense interest. Was it possible that the man had told the truth, and that fifty thousand dollars in bank-notes lay within? All things are possible, and he watched the opening paper as a miner might watch the stroke of the pick that is to lay bare a gold mine.

In a minute the package was wide open, and its contents revealed. Frank fell back in his chair, with a breath of relief.

"I knowed it!" he said. "I told Tommy Brown the feller was playing it. Nothing but papers, and not a greenback in the pile."

The package, indeed, seemed to contain only a number of neatly-folded papers—letters, the most of them seemed. As for money, there was not a trace of it present.

Not a word came from the detective's lips. He opened the letters one after another, read them with an eye that seemed to take in their important contents almost at a glance, and laid them one by one aside.

Not a change of expression came upon his impassive features as he read. When finished, he took up his pipe, filled it again with tobacco, struck a match, and lighted it. He leaned back in his chair in exasperating silence.

Yet the boy asked no questions. He knew that there is no use to pump at a well that will flow of itself if it be given time.

Dick took a dozen puffs in silence. Then he picked up one of the letters, and looked over it again.

"You're a jewel, Frank, as I said before," he remarked.

"I know it," answered Frank, in the same tone. "They'd have me among the crown jewels of England, if they could get me. But I'm out of a true-blue American mine, and there ain't any use in Vic's bidding for me."

"These papers may be worth their weight in gold," continued Dick.

"That's more to the p'int than calling boys jewels," retorted Frank. "Come now; let out; is the Dodger in them?"

"That I can't say," answered Dick, "but my fancy runs that way."

He took a folded letter from a package in his drawer and compared the writing.

"Look, boy; it's very much alike. This is one of the Dodger's epistles. It's very much the same."

"It is the same, I should say," announced Frank, after comparing the two letters. "What are they all about, Dick?" he asked.

"That's what I'm trying to smoke out. I don't just see through this little game. This writer—he signs himself, you see, Albert Wilson—is working up some game which his correspondent Converse is in. But he's too cautious to put down in ink what it is, or where it's to be done. And these letters came from all over the West. The latest comes from Chicago. All I can make out is that it will take a big stake in ready cash to work the job, and Converse is to find the money."

"By Jiminy!" exclaimed Frank, "is that

what he's up to? Swearing he lost fifty thousand in the fire! Like as not that's a dodge to shut up people's eyes. The fifty thousand's salted down somewhere for this game."

Dick's only reply was to rise, knock the ashes from his pipe, and wrap up the letters again. Then, putting the package in his drawer, he resumed his coat and hat.

"Come," he said to Frank.

"Where are you going?"

"To Tommy Brown's. I want to see this man when he comes for his box—if we are not too late."

In less than half an hour afterward the two were in the restaurant which Frank had visited the night before under such exciting circumstances.

"Hello, young one!" exclaimed the proprietor heartily. "Round again, safe and sound, and not a hair singed! Give us your hand, boy. I don't often have the chance to welcome such a hero."

"How are you, fire-bug?" asked the policeman, from a corner in which he was seated.

"Has the man been after his box yet?" asked Frank.

"No," answered the policeman. "He didn't know it was saved till an hour ago. I took him word myself, and he jumped a foot from the floor. Whether it was joy or t'other, I couldn't make out."

"Didn't I tell you it was a fake?" averred Frank. "He didn't want it saved!"

"Maybe not, but—Hush! here he comes now!"

He had seen an approaching form from a window. In a minute afterward the door opened and the rescued man walked into the saloon.

Dick Wister, who had seated himself in a retired corner of the room on entering, now looked up, fixing his eyes with much interest on the stranger.

What he saw was a man of over the middle height, and somewhat corpulent in figure. His face was smoothly shaved, and while in no respect handsome, had a certain dignity, and a fixed and resolute expression.

Frank looked toward the detective, and caught a negative shake of the head from him. He had just arrived at the same opinion himself. This man was not John P. Clarkson, though he bore considerable resemblance to that personage. He was enough like him to be his brother, but was not the Artful Dodger himself.

"I am told you have a box of mine, saved from the fire last night," he said in a voice of studied ease to the restaurant-keeper.

"Here it is," answered Mr. Brown. "The key I gave to Mr. Jones here, that there may be no meddling with the contents."

"Judicious, but unnecessary," answered Mr. Converse, receiving the key from the policeman. "It only holds some ordinary business papers." He unlocked it, and ran his fingers carelessly through the contents.

"They are all right. Do I understand that there was nothing else saved? My money—"

His voice seemed to quiver.

"I reckon it's ashes, in the hotel cellar," answered Frank stepping forward. "Most any handful of ashes 'll pass for it. I thought I had it when I struck that box. After I got that it was a leetle too warm to go on a hunt for spondulicks."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Converse. "Do I understand that this is the brave boy who risked his life to save my property?"

"That's about the size of it," answered the policeman.

"Then I certainly owe him a reward. Here, my dear young friend."

He pressed some money into Frank's hand.

"And you, gentlemen—"

"No, no, we want nothing. You have lost enough already."

"That's so," said Frank. "And I won't take a penny, either."

"You must, boy! I insist on it."

"I won't," declared Frank. "I'd think I was robbing you."

The gentleman refused to receive the money back, but Frank thrust it into his pocket, declaring that he wasn't mean enough to take it.

A conversation ensued, in which Mr. Converse questioned Frank closely concerning his experience in the burning room. Did he see nothing but the box? The money was done up in a close paper parcel, ready to be taken to bank next morning.

Frank stoutly avowed that he considered the box enough to satisfy any reasonable person. When he had got his ten fingers on that he made for the ladder. After a few words more the

gentleman left, taking the box with him, and with renewed thanks to all concerned.

Ten minutes afterward the detective and the boy left the restaurant.

"Why didn't you take the money?" asked Dick. "You fairly earned it."

"I didn't want to be in his pay," answered Frank. "I might have to work against him. A feller likes to take a job with clean hands."

"A good thought. That man is not our game, but he makes a mighty close likeness to the Dodger. There's work in the wind for both of us, my lad."

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOW OF FRAUD.

FRANK MELTON proved not wrong in his calculations. On the second day after the hotel fire an item crept into the local columns of the newspapers, to the effect that Jacob P. Converse, dealer in West India coffees and sugars, was in financial difficulties, through the loss of fifty thousand dollars burned in his room at the great hotel conflagration.

Some of the papers expressed sympathy for him. Others said it served him right. What were banks for? What man with a grain of wit would keep so much money in a hotel?

Mr. Converse made no reply to these criticisms. But the day afterward his creditors received notice from him that he was in financial straits, and wished them to meet and consider the situation.

These successive steps were keenly observed by the detective and his apprentice. The affair looked straight enough, but Dick Wister was not the man to take looks for facts, and he waited developments with curious interest.

The meeting of the creditors was a stormy one. They had examined the store and found it nearly empty of stock. The books showed a large cash balance. Where was it? Burned up, said Mr. Converse. This explanation was received with many shrugs and looks of doubt.

"No business man would keep such a sum in a hotel room," was the plain declaration. "It looks like a set-up job."

"As you will, gentlemen," answered Mr. Converse, with a haughty air. "It may not be business to make a heavy purchase at a low figure. That is what I was preparing to do. Here is my check-book. You can see that I drew that money from bank the day before the fire. There was a spot-cash chance for a big deal in coffee the next morning. I worked for the best, as any business man would. Chance and ill luck played against me, that's all."

The creditors looked at one another. This explanation had some reason in it.

"What do you propose?" asked the heaviest of them.

"Just this," was the reply. "My business is gone to the dogs. There's no use trying to get over this shock. I could not offer ten cents on the dollar. Take all, gentlemen. I am ready to give all I am worth into your hands, and start life as a beggar again."

But we cannot dwell on this scene. That the creditors were angry need not be said. Most of them had strong doubts of the loss of the money in the hotel fire; but how were they to prove this? He had offered them all the property they could find. But how much was there they could not find?

Mr. Converse seemed to be greatly concerned for their losses. He showed them the box which had been saved from the fire.

"We are all losers by that dreadful conflagration," he said, feelingly. "Many lost their lives; others their money. You and I lost our money. This is all I saved—through the aid of a brave boy. The very clothes I have on were loaned me by a friend. I should like you to examine these papers."

The papers proved to be both innocent and useless. If there had been anything of doubt or value in the box, it had been carefully weeded out.

The meeting broke up at length, the creditors dispersing in a very unsatisfied state of mind.

Two days afterward the principal losers by the failure were privately called together again; this time at the request of Richard Wister, detective.

"Gentlemen, I have asked you to meet me on a matter of some importance," began Dick. The persons to whom he spoke were the three leading creditors, assembled in the private office of Brown & Borden. "I wish your word that what is said here shall go no further."

"You can trust us in that, Mr. Wister."

"I would ask then—what is your opinion of the Converse failure?"

"It is my full belief that there is fraud behind it," answered Mr. Borden. "But how are we to prove it? This unlucky hotel fire puts us in a hole. He can say what he chooses. The ashes yield no evidence to the contrary."

"There may be more evidence than you imagine," was Dick's reply. "This young man was in Mr. Converse's room after he left it."

He pointed to Frank, who was demurely seated behind him.

"Gentlemen, I have your word for secrecy.—There was more brought out of that fire than the box that has been shown you."

The creditors started sharply at this, and fixed their eyes on Frank with looks of intense curiosity and expectation.

"Does Converse know of this?" asked Mr. Borden.

"No. There is one way to deal with honest men and another with rogues. This man may belong to the former class, but it's my fancy he belongs to the latter. Detective Frank—that's the boy here—has had his eye-teeth cut and knows a thing or two. Converse told you, did he not, that the money was tied up in a paper package?"

"Yes."

The creditors were now in a state of eager expectation.

"Here is the package. You may see for yourselves how many thousands are in it."

He laid the package which Frank had brought him on the table before them, opened it, and revealed its contents.

"Gentlemen, if you can find any bank-notes there, you will be more lucky than I have been. You may read these letters if you wish."

They gazed blankly at the package.

"Are we to understand that this came out of Converse's room?"

"You can bet your bottom nickel on that!" averred Frank, now first speaking.

"What are these letters?"

"Read them. You will not gain much from them except that Jacob P. Converse is a rogue, and is in a plot with some other rogue out West. Gentlemen, you have been victimized."

Mr. Borden snatched up several of the letters and began eagerly to read them. The others followed his example. At the end some words in a low tone passed between them.

"We agree with you," said Mr. Borden, at length. "We have been victimized. Converse must be arrested at once."

"What for?" asked Dick, coolly.

"To make him disgorge."

"And do you fancy you will ever see a penny of that money if you take such action; or if even you let him see that he is suspected? You are not dealing with a beginner in fraud, my dear sirs."

"What are we to do, then? Shall we try and lay our hands on this Wilson?"

"That might be wiser. But, how will you do it?"

"How?"

They looked at one another with questioning eyes.

"That is more in your line than in ours, Mr. Wister."

"Now you are beginning to see daylight ahead," answered Dick. "But to seize Wilson would do no good. The fact is, these men are working some deep game together, and your money is to be used as their capital in crime. If you want to recover your losses their game must be unearthed, and the pair of them caught in the act."

Mr. Borden nodded approvingly.

"That is detective work, Mr. Wister. It is in your line, not in ours."

"You are right there. And it is no everyday detective work," responded Dick.

"Well; what is your idea?" asked the merchant.

"It is this, in a nutshell," answered Dick. "It takes money to make money. We have a promising lead before us, but it will need funds to work it. I don't know how deep you are involved in the Converse business. Twenty or thirty thousand likely. Well, are you willing to venture a couple of thousand to recover it? Or to pay the expenses of the job, and a thousand for fee?"

The three merchants looked at him with a sense of momentary alarm. Were they being asked to throw good money after bad? Then they looked at one another. Now some words passed in a low tone. Finally Mr. Borden turned to Dick and said:

"What you say has reason in it, Mr. Wister. It looks hopeful, too. Yet it is a deep game, as you remark, and may very easily fail. Mr. Thompson thinks we had best shoulder our

present losses and stop there. I don't. If Converse is the rogue he seems, I would be willing to lose something more to bring him to justice. Let us have time to consider this. You shall have our answer to-morrow."

"Meanwhile, not a word," warned Dick. "Should a whisper get abroad it might spoil our whole game."

"You may trust us, sir."

"To-morrow be it then. Good-day. Come, Frank."

"By the way, don't this boy want a situation?" asked one of the merchants. "I could make a good place for a boy of his caliber."

"Much obliged," answered Frank, "but I've got the job now I'm best built for. You'll hear of Detective Frank some of these days. I wouldn't give up this lay for the best sit in New York."

And holding his head up proudly, Frank followed his employer into the street.

Dick turned to him as they walked along. There was a smile on his face.

"They bite," he said. "There's work ahead for us."

"That's my notion," answered Frank.

"I would have given a new dollar if I could have seen the inside of that box before Converse had a chance to handle the papers. I doubt if he showed them all to the creditors."

"Maybe not," chimed in Frank.

"But there's no use taking trouble about that. The past is past. The future is ours. You must keep ready, youngster, to make a big jump at a moment's notice."

"What's in the wind now?" asked Frank, curiously.

"Converse will not stay long in New York. He will wait for some kind of a release from his creditors, which they can't help giving him if he hands them over all his possessions. He will not leave here till he can leave his record clean behind him. That done—he has business elsewhere."

"That's about the size of it."

"Now, Frank, I'm going to put a big trust in you. It is impossible for me to leave New York just at present. I have other irons in the fire. I might employ some other detective, but I don't want to divide the spoils. Will I be safe in trusting you to trail this man till I get my hands free?"

"That's for you to say," answered Frank. "You know me as well as I do myself. I'll do my best."

"Well spoken, boy!" and Dick clapped him heartily on the shoulder. "I'll trust you, my young pard. I have my eye on Converse, and will know when he is ready to start West. Then you must take the trail, and as you value life, honor, and profit, don't let him escape you. Whether he goes to Chicago, St. Louis, New Orleans, no matter where, don't let him out of your sight."

"Suppose he sees me?" suggested Frank. "He saw me at Tommy Brown's. He might twig the cut of my jib."

"True. You must be disguised. We will have an answer from those merchants to-morrow—a favorable one, I'm sure. Then, with money enough for traveling expenses, you must be ready to go at the word."

"That's me; or at the wink," answered Frank. "I'll be there, you bet."

CHAPTER IV.

A RUSH THROUGH SPACE.

THROUGH the busy bustle of passengers at the Grand Central Railroad Station pushed a stout form—that of the gentleman whom we already know as Jacob P. Converse.

At some distance behind, and watching his movements intently, were two others; one presenting the spare frame and alert face of Dick Wister; the other undoubtedly that of Frank Melton, though greatly changed from his usual appearance.

Frank's usual negligent apparel, of cheap material and careless fit, had been replaced by a suit of fine cloth, closely fitting, while the polished cuffs at his wrists, with their gold-linked sleeve-buttons, his neat collar and tie—with its glittering pin, the watch-chain that extended across his vest, and the other details of his attire, seemed to bespeak the well-cared-for son of a wealthy sire.

His face had changed with his dress. The features were the same, but the expression was different. The rollicking heedlessness, alternating with ferret-like sharpness, of Frank's usual countenance, were replaced by a look of modest quiet and lack of assurance that transformed the whole face. No one who had seen the Frank of yes-

terday would have recognized the Frank of today.

In fact, this modest expression was no easy matter for the boy to maintain. Some show of the old impudence, some of the old keen flash of the eyes would come back, despite his efforts to sustain his new character.

But he had only the eyes of the man in advance to deceive, and he could look as he pleased when out of his range of vision.

In one hand Frank grasped a new and handsome grip-sack; in the other he held a fashionable cane. He might have been a college student returning home for a holiday, or a well-kept home youth on his way to see the world abroad.

"Now, boy, you have only your own wits to lean on," said Dick, as they moved forward through the crowd. "Wide-awake's the word from this on. He is off, and you on his trail, and you will not have me to fall back on in difficulties."

"Bless your heart, I will then," answered Frank. "I'll be no further off from you in Chicago or San Francisco than I would be in Harlem or Brooklyn. I'm going to make the telegraph talk, whenever I get in a hole; and I want you to talk square back."

"I'll not be long in answering; that you can trust to. Stay; he is at the ticket-office. Wait here."

Dick slipped through the throng in an easy, gliding fashion of his own, and in less than a minute was beside the railing behind which the ticket-buyers were moving in slow procession. Mr. Converse had just reached the window.

"Through; for Buffalo," he said.

With a quick movement, the agent threw out a ticket, took his money, and handed him the change; then turned alertly to the next, while Converse passed on.

"For Buffalo, eh?" thought Dick, as he took his place in the line. "Is that a blind, or is it business? I would give something if I could follow up this lay myself; but it will have to be left to Frank's wit and judgment."

In a minute more he, too, had bought a through ticket for Buffalo. With this he sought Frank, who had remained well in the background.

"Here is your ticket," he said. "Buffalo seems to be his first stop. This train will only stop at the leading stations, and there you can keep an eye on the platforms—though it's my notion that he's bound much further West. Your real work begins when you reach Buffalo. I don't think you need further instructions."

"Not much," answered Frank. "You've crowded me full already. Any more will drive the old lot out. There's only one thing I'm trusting to. 'Keep your eyes open, your mouth shut, and your face out of sight, and look out for quick chances.' That's what I'm going to do."

Dick looked on the alert face of the lad with some admiration.

"I don't know any man I'd rather trust," he remarked. "There's only one thing more: If you run out of money wire for it at once. You have enough to carry you for several months, but something might happen. Those creditors have acted handsomely, and are ready to see us through."

"And I'm going through, if it's in the wood," rejoined Frank resolutely. "There—the gate's open. Good-by, old man, and don't forget Frank!"

"Good-by, Frank, and good-luck."

Dick pressed his hand with the fervor of affection—for he had a very soft place in his heart for the bright boy; and stood watching his trim form as he passed through the gate a few steps behind Converse, and moved steadily forward.

"I doubt if a boy of his age ever had such a big job laid out for him before," said the detective to himself.

"It is risky to trust so much to such a youngster. I ought to go myself—if I could. And yet Frank is as keen as a razor, and has had no small experience. I think he'll make a good record."

The detective turned away, and slowly threaded his way back toward the street, his mind still filled with clinging doubts.

He had reason for them, for the boy who had just set out on his difficult mission was destined to have no light and easy task, in dealing with the experienced rogue whom he had been set to watch.

By the time Dick Wister had reached the door of the station, the train containing the fugitive and his youthful pursuer was rolling away on the beginning of its long journey.

In what part of the train Converse was Frank did not trouble himself to discover. He had

taken good care to see that he was on the train, and had not left it again, and that was all he cared for just now—other than to keep his face from the man's eyes.

How sharp a man Converse was his pursuer had no means of knowing, but if he should recognize him as the boy who had saved his box of papers from the burning building it might rouse suspicion in his mind, or otherwise stand in the way of success, so that caution was necessary.

Frank, meanwhile, set himself to enjoying his journey. He had never before been far away from the streets of New York, and was in ardent hope of much pleasure and profit from the long route before him. He would certainly come back with a wide addition to his knowledge of the world, and much food for future thought.

Away they went, mile after mile speeding backward under the engine's rattling wheels. The day was a fine one for travel, the sun not blindingly bright, yet well lighting up the plains and valleys through which sped the train, and gilding silver the spires of distant villages, each of which was visible for a few minutes as the train dashed swiftly onward.

Here green rolling hills, and there fertile valleys; here a well-farmed country, there broad pasture-fields; here the glint of river-waters, there the dark shadows of thick clustering woodland;—all was new to the young traveler, and all full of enjoyment for his unsated eyes.

Through village after village, through towns of more pretension, they dashed without stopping, groups of loungers on the platforms looking with a mild interest at the flying train, street after street opening out and running away in far perspective—only to vanish again after a second's glance, houses chasing each other like the moving figures in a panorama.

Here and there, at the important cities on their route, the rattling wheels slowly slackened speed, until they came to a halt, and for a few minutes the train stood still, as if to take breath for another wild plunge through space.

At these stations Frank had work laid out for him. At each of them he left the car and descended to the platform, looking keenly along the line of the train to see if Converse did the same.

Only once was he successful in this quest. Converse did leave the train. But it seemed to be only for a breath of fresh air, for he scrambled hastily back at the "All aboard" of the conductor. Frank, who had taken care to keep his face in shadow, followed his example, and they were away again.

But, we must be excused from giving the varied details of this day of travel, or of the many vivid impressions it made on the mind of the boy, whose experience of life had been mainly confined to the bustling streets of a great city.

The new world of the country was a revelation to him. Many a time did he feel a strong desire, as some fresh bit of rural loveliness broke upon his vision, to leave the train and his mission, and enjoy to the full the charm of those sunny landscapes.

But, duty outruled inclination, and he was forced to satisfy himself with eye-glimpses of such a wonderful outlook as had never come to his dreaming fancy in his narrow city chamber.

Night fell hours before the train reached its destination. There was nothing further to see, other than the flashing lights of the stations as the train flew past; or to hear, than the roar of the train, or the momentary bustle as it halted at long intervals.

Yet no sleep came to the young traveler's eyes. He was too unused to the railroad for slumber to visit his senses easily. And he never for a moment forgot the necessity of wakefulness and incessant vigilance.

It was midnight when they rolled into the station at the great Lake City. Now the young detective had every reason to be wide awake. What were Converse's plans? Had he bought a ticket to Buffalo as a blind, and was it his purpose to go on without delay—to Chicago, or elsewhere?

This question could only be answered by events. Frank lost not a moment in springing from the car to the platform of the well-lighted station. Indeed, the train had barely stopped before his feet were on the boards.

In a minute more people were swarming from the train. Frank had located the car which held the man in whom he was interested, and watched that with the eyes of a hawk. His watchfulness was soon rewarded. The portly form of Converse was visible, descending from the car and moving steadily forward.

Frank followed him, grip-sack in hand. It was soon evident that the traveler had ended

his journey for that night. He walked through the station, and out through the line of vociferating cabmen, and took his seat in a hotel coach that was backed up to the pavement.

Frank hurried forward, with a momentary impulse to enter the same coach; but second thoughts caused him to halt. This course was risky. He contented himself with observing the name of the hotel on the coach-panels, and turned away.

Not until the coach had rattled off, with its load of passengers, did he turn his steps in the same direction.

"He's nailed for to-night, anyhow," he said to himself. "I reckon I can walk. I'm in for a good snooze for the rest of the night, and an early get-up in the morning. Now for the hotel."

A few questions put him on the right track, and within ten minutes he found himself in the broad waiting-room of the hotel to which Converse had been driven.

He was not in sight, nor was his name on the hotel-register.

Frank, while writing his name, looked curiously up the row of names before him. That of "Converse" was not there.

"Has he changed his name, or given me the slip?" he asked himself. "Not the last anyhow."

He had at that moment caught sight of a well-known form on the stairway.

"I'd like to know which of these two names he's sailing under."

Within fifteen minutes afterward, however, this and all other thoughts were driven out of the boy's sleepy brain. Stretched on a hotel bed, he was soon as sound asleep as if slumber were the one thing needful in this world of care and toil.

CHAPTER V.

A MAN OF MANY NAMES.

AN early breakfast, a short walk through the wide streets of Buffalo, and Frank Melton was ready for his day's work. The morning was one of brisk temperature. A sharp northwest blast blew over the lakes and whistled through the streets, forcing the boy to button his ulster and draw up his collar over his ears.

"Stinging weather, by Jiminy!" he said, with a shiver. "Dick said I'd find it worse up here than in York, and I reckon he about hit it. It's lucky he bought me this warm-lem-up. I'll be sensible to hike back to the hotel.—No I won't," he finished, as something caught his eye.

This was the form of Mr. Converse, who was walking slowly along the opposite side of the street. The sight of him roused all the detective instinct in the boy's blood, and he set himself to watch his movements.

It was not a difficult task. The steps of the gentleman seemed to be directed to the post-office. Reaching this, he entered and was lost to sight for several minutes. He emerged empty-handed, and continued his walk. Frank still followed.

Yet there was nothing to learn. Converse was simply taking a morning constitutional. Leaving the business thoroughfare, he sought one of the broad and handsome residence streets of the city, where he strolled slowly onward, as if admiring its stately edifices, with their broad and tasteful grounds.

From there, through a series of streets, Converse sought the river-front of the city, then in all the bustle of the active shipping trade which centers there. Vessels loading and unloading, drays and wagons coming and going, hundreds of men actively engaged in busy labors, the boy gazed on a scene of bustling turmoil not surpassed by that of the wharves of the metropolis itself.

But in all this he took little interest. It was too much like what he saw every day of his life to have any novelty for him. What he did look on with interest were the waters which bathed the wharves on which he stood.

He knew that these were the waters of the Niagara River, and that not many miles from where he stood these quiet waters dashed on with race-horse speed, leaping like the ocean waves when lashed with the whip of the hurricane, and then in one broad mass poured over a precipice, making the most stupendous cataract known in the world—the far-famed Falls of Niagara.

"Wouldn't I give something to see them!" said the boy to himself. "It ain't much good looking at this water and trying to see pictures in it. Don't Jacob P. want to see the Falls? I

do, amazing, and I'd give him a V out of my pile if he'd only take a run down there. But I don't s'pose he's so obliging."

However that was, Jacob P., as the boy called him, had by this time seen enough of the wharves, and bent his steps away from that locality—perhaps to escape the biting wind that whistled past his ears.

Frank duly followed him. Pleasure was one thing and duty another, and duty came first.

In a half-hour afterward Converse stopped again at the post-office. The morning mail was now in, and he had been simply killing time till its arrival.

This time he left its doors with a letter in his hand, and a look of satisfaction on his face. He walked now directly to the hotel.

Here he sought the smoking-room, treated himself to a cigar, and deliberately opened his epistle, throwing the envelope into the waste-paper basket.

Frank watched him from an adjoining room. He saw him purse his brows over the document, frown for a moment, and then assume a more pleased look as he read further down. Finally he leaped from his chair, thrust the letter into his pocket, and walked with a brisk tread into the reception-room of the hotel.

"Means business," thought Frank. "That letter's made up his mind for him. He didn't know what he was to do, but he knows now—and I reckon I soon will."

Converse's first first movement was to a railroad time-table, which he studied diligently for several minutes. Then he turned to the hotel clerk and asked for the key of his room.

"What number?"

"320."

"Here it is."

In a minute more he was ascending in the elevator to the upper floors.

Frank, who had kept well in the background, now stepped forward and examined the time-table. It was that of the through Express trains on the westward roads. He next lounged up to the desk and cast his eye over the register. There it was, room number 320, name—"Caleb Williams."

The boy gave a meaning whistle as he turned away. He next sought the smoking-room, and picked up the envelope that lay on the top of the contents of the waste-basket.

The name was the same—"Mr. Caleb Williams. An equally interesting feature of the envelope was the post-mark. This read, "Louisville, Ky."

The young detective seated himself in the chair which Converse had just vacated, and set himself to work with all the power of his thinking machine.

"Wonder how many names he carries in his bag?" he said to himself. "Don't s'pose that matters though; names is as cheap as bananas; what he's up to is of more account. It's my notion he's got word to streak out West, for Louisville or somewhere. 'Spected to meet somebody here likely, but if he did that somebody's gone on and sent him word to folter. That's 'bout the size of it, far as I can make out, and I reckon I'm in for another railroad ride, and a sight of the wide West."

So confident was Frank of this that he walked to the office, called for his bill, and ordered his traveling-bag to be brought down-stairs.

"When does the next Chicago through train go out?" he asked.

"Two o'clock."

"That so? Then you needn't hurry. I'll wait and try what sort of a dinner you fellows are up to. Meanwhile I'll take a walk around and exhaust your city."

The clerk looked after him with a curious air.

"Is that chap putting it on, or has he really been through the mill?" he asked himself. "One can always count on airs and impudence in the young sprouts nowadays; but common sense and experience are not so plentiful a crop."

At two o'clock sharp the Lake Shore Express drew out from the Buffalo station, and Frank Melton began another long journey over the broad United States. Jacob Converse, alias Caleb Williams, was aboard the train, and the flight and pursuit had again begun.

The youthful detective was no longer troubled by the fear that his game might leave the train at a way station. He was so sure that he would not stop short of Chicago, that he hardly gave him a thought on the route, but set himself to enjoy the scenery.

It was not till, on the next day, the train landed its passengers in the great city of the West—on lakes, that Frank returned to the object of his quest.

As before, he watched Converse till he had left the train, observed what hotel he had chosen and followed him thither, this time quickly enough to reach the office before the guests from the train had registered.

He stood close enough to see Converse write his name, and observed that four others followed before the time came for himself to place his signature in the book.

He was full of curiosity. Was it Jacob P. Converse or Caleb Williams who had just arrived in Chicago? A glance up the page for the fifth name above his own decided it. An odd smile came upon his face as he saw there written the name of "Rowland Hill, Boston."

"Bless my pumpkin head if he ain't took another name out of his bag!" ran through the boy's mind.

"If he keeps on he'll have enough names to make a city directory. He's bound not to leave his name for a trail, that's sure. But if he only knowed how close this little ferret was on his track he'd not take life quite so easy."

Frank spent the rest of that day in a state of watchfulness. But nothing came from it. Converse did not even leave the hotel.

It was ten o'clock at night when the young spy sought his room, fatigued with the day's labor.

"I never thought of asking what's the tariff here," he said, "but I s'pose it's all down on this paper." He turned to the card of terms on the room door. "Four dollars a day! Whew!" he whistled.

"I could live a week on that at home and not half try. It's lucky somebody else's footing this bill.—What else is there here?" He continued to read. "Guests are advised to leave their valuables with the clerk, as the proprietors will not be responsible for anything left in the rooms." By jingo! and I've got my pocket chock full of money—three or four hundred. I wonder if it's safe to keep it 'bout me? Some sneak might slip in and go for my pile; and that'd be thundering awkward. Maybe I'd best leave it with the clerk."

The amount of money the boy had on his person, indeed, was something immense to him, and the more he thought about it the heavier it weighed.

A few minutes decided him. He would not take the chance, but would leave his money with the clerk.

This he did, making him count it and give a receipt for the amount. This done the boy went to bed with a clear conscience, and with only a few dollars in loose change in his pocket.

The events of the succeeding few days we need not closely chronicle. Converse seemed waiting, but, meanwhile, taking it easy; and Frank, who soon decided that nothing was to be gained by constantly watching him, took the opportunity to see what he could of the growing giant of the West, the great city of Chicago.

There was only one movement made by Converse which Frank found of interest. He tracked him to one of the leading banks of the city, and saw him make what seemed a large deposit, though he could make no guess as to its amount.

He evidently had no previous account there, for the teller made him out a bank-book, which he gave him, together with a book of blank checks.

"Here's news worth sending to Dick!" thought the young scout. "The creditors might want to nail this cash. I s'pose it's some of Jacob P.'s stealings. Wish I knowed what name he put it in under. Anyhow I'll wire Dick all the names he's swinging."

Seeking the telegraph-office, Frank sent a long message to his chief in New York, bidding him return answer if he had any directions to give.

On leaving the office he strolled on indefinitely, intending to return in a couple of hours to see if there was any answer.

His steps took him to the lake shore of the city, and he walked along here for an hour, much interested in the evidences of business which abundantly met his eyes.

Returning by an indefinite course toward the hotel, chance led his footsteps to the Chicago and St. Louis R. R. station. This fact would have been of no importance to him had he not seen, just before him, Mr. Converse, who was conversing earnestly with a middle-aged and well-dressed gentleman.

The boy was at once wide awake. He followed them into the station, and observed them from a distance. Their conversation continued in the same earnest manner.

Could he get near enough to hear what they

were saying? It might be of great importance to his guest.

He slipped around in a careless manner, taking care to keep his face turned from Converse's eyes, and in a few minutes came up close behind them. Here he leaned in a listless manner against an iron column.

"Can you not cut loose and go through now?" Converse was saying. "It is important to close the deal without delay. I am off for St. Louis on the next train. Come, get ready and go with me."

"When does the train pull out?"

"In ten minutes."

"Can't do it, then. I've got some things to wind up here. But I'm in on the deal solid. I'll be down the road in a few days. Where shall I find you?"

They stepped away as he spoke, and Frank did not catch the answer, though he listened intently.

To St. Louis?—In ten minutes?—Here was news! He had very nearly been thrown from the track. To St. Louis be it, then!

He walked to the ticket-office, thrust his hand into his pocket, and—it came out empty. He remembered now, to his annoyance, that he had left all his money with the hotel-clerk.

What was to be done? He had not change enough in his pocket to buy a ticket for half the distance. And how was he to live if all his money was spent on railroading? He stood in a deep quandary.

"By Jiminy! he sha'n't fling me that way," he declared, at length. "To St. Louis or bu'st, them's my sentiments. Here goes for all that's in it."

Asking the price of a ticket, he found he had not money enough to carry him half-way. But to go back to the hotel would be to imperil all his work. He must go on, for good or bad.

Purchasing a ticket to the first stopping-place, Frank boldly entered the train, having first seen Converse do the same after a shake hands with his companion.

In three minutes afterward it was under way, with Frank as a passenger on a ticket for less than half-way, and fifty cents in his pocket as his sole available wealth.

CHAPTER VI.

BEATING A RAILROAD.

THE train on which the young detective found himself was a Lightning Express, making but two or three stops between Chicago and St. Louis. The first of these was at Bloomington, about one-third of the distance, to which place his ticket took him.

Beyond Bloomington he had but his wits to trust to. But, though he had no experience in the art of "beating a railroad," he was not troubled by fears of the result.

"It's time enough to jump a fence when you come to it," was his motto. "There's not a grain of sense in manufacturing worries."

Bloomington was duly reached and passed, and now the fence which Frank had to jump came every minute nearer and nearer. Fortunately for him, the conductor had abundant time to take up his tickets, and was in no hurry. An hour had passed before he came through the train, with his demand of "Tickets."

Frank was busy reading a newspaper when he came along, and failed to hear the conductor's mild call of "Ticket." It was repeated, more loudly this time, but the boy gave no sign of hearing.

"Ticket!" cried the conductor sharply. "Show your ticket!"

He might have been speaking to the moon, for all the attention Frank paid to him. He turned over the page of his paper and began to read the other side.

"Do you hear me? Show your ticket!" exclaimed the angry official, giving the inattentive passenger a sharp rap on the shoulder.

The fact of his being but a boy may have made the conductor hit harder than he would have done with a man. However that was, the blow on Frank's shoulder was not a light one, and he sprang up with a hot show of anger.

"What are you hitting me for?" he cried fiercely. "Do you think because I'm only a boy you can come round here pounding me?"

"Show your ticket!" again demanded the conductor.

"I'll show you!" exclaimed Frank savagely. "Square yourself, if that's your game. I don't let no man hit me without hitting back."

"Come, boy, I asked for your ticket three times. I had to tap you."

"Had to tap me, did you? By the jumping frog, I don't let anybody tap me! If you are twice as big as me I don't care for you the toss of a red cent. Mind that, Mister Man."

"I've got to see your ticket, I tell you," cried the conductor impatiently.

"Got to, have you? That's a big word out of a little mouth. Why don't you carry a club with you, and tap passengers on the head when you come round? It will save your breath."

"Come, boy, no nonsense! Let me see your ticket. I must go on."

"Go on! I don't care!" retorted Frank. "I didn't ask you to stop. If you calculate to pound me into showing my ticket, you're barking up the wrong tree, that's all."

Frank settled back in his seat, opened his newspaper, and began to read again, as serenely as if the conductor were a mile away.

The latter stood perplexed. He demanded the ticket again, in a fierce tone, but the boy paid no more attention than if it had been a buzzing fly. The conductor pushed him. No attention. He raised his hand as if to strike him again. But he was a little dubious about stirring up this wasp.

"I'll have you put off the train," cried the angry official. "The rules of the road must be observed."

"If you do I'll make your old road howl," answered the boy. "I reckon there's somebody knows a thing or two besides you road emperors. Maybe you think passengers have nothing to do but to show up tickets. You've seen mine often enough now, and if you touch me again I'll make you see stars."

The conductor, who was a small-sized and rather mild-looking individual, looked at the seemingly furious boy, and concluded it might be well not to meddle with such a bristling porcupine.

He had quite forgotten that he had taken up his young passenger's ticket to Bloomington, and never dreamed that he had no ticket to show.

"I will put you off at Springfield, young man," he said. "That's our next stop, and the rules of the road must be obeyed."

"All right. Springfield's the capital of Illinois, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then it's bound to be brim full of lawyers, and it's just the place to get in my work on this one-hoss railroad. Now I reckon you'll let me finish this murder case, and won't come here stirring me up as if I was a pig in a puddle."

Frank turned again to his paper, while the smiles with which the other passengers had heard this colloquy now broke into a chorus of laughter.

The conductor looked helplessly at the impassive boy. Should he stop the train and put him off then and there? He would think of it, he concluded, and meanwhile went on punching the tickets of the remaining passengers. Frank continued to read as demurely as if nothing had occurred.

"You're a bold boy," said one of the passengers to him, after the conductor had left the car. "I'd as soon beard a lion in his den as a conductor on his train. These fellows are lords, you know, in their own domain."

"I don't let no chap hit me without hitting back," averred Frank; "not if he's as big as a rain-water-barrel. I reckon I pared that lion's claws for him."

"I don't know but you did," answered the passenger, with a laugh, which was echoed from the neighboring seats.

"These hustlers get mighty limp when a fellow like me takes the starch out of them," continued Frank. "I guess that one wants laundrying again, to stiffen him up."

"Give us your hand, boy. By the Rocky Mountains, you're a sundowner!" cried the delighted passenger.

"I dunno 'bout that," rejoined Frank, "but the chap that tries to sit on me is going to feel pins—and straight ones, too."

Frank had made a chatty acquaintance, and during the rest of the journey to Springfield a lively conversation was kept up between the two.

On reaching the city of Springfield the train again came to a halt. It had not fully stopped when the conductor hustled into the car, and stepped briskly up to the easy-going boy.

"Now, sir, there's got to be an end to this nonsense. You've got to show your ticket, or off you go."

"That so?" said Frank, rising and stretching himself. "Where are we, if I might ask?"

"At Springfield. And here you'll stop if you don't show your ticket."

"Just the place I was going to stop at," answered Frank easily. "Much obliged for the ride.—Good-day, old man!" he said to his late acquaintance. "Adieu, conductor! *Au revoir*."

Frank walked quietly from the car.

"What does *au revoir* mean?" asked the conductor of a passenger.

"It's the French for, 'till we meet again.'"

"Meet again! I hope to gracious I won't soon meet that young impudence factory again! Glad I'm done with him this trip." And the conductor ended with a groan that set all around him laughing.

In two or three minutes more the train was again swiftly in motion. Frank's late acquaintance looked from the car window to catch a last glimpse of the boy, on the platform.

"Not there," he said. "He's made tracks quick. Off to look up a Springfield lawyer, maybe, and make this old road howl, as he threatened. He's just the coolest specimen of young America I ever put eyes on—and I'll go have a smoke on the strength of it."

Rising, the middle-aged and benevolent Westerner made his way through the train to the smoking-car. Here he made a worm-fence backward over the swaying floor to an empty seat, and was about to drop into it, when he halted and stared in surprise.

Before him he saw the smiling face of his late acquaintance, Frank Melton.

"Hello, old man!" cried Frank, cheerily. "Squat down. Here's room for one."

"What the thunder are you doing here? I thought you'd left."

"Came aboard again," answered Frank, easily. "I didn't think I had to lay out a map of my plans for that conductor. If he don't want me aboard, he can put me off at the next stop. Going to smoke?"

"That's what brung me."

"Anchor here then, and we'll finish our chat."

"That suits me to a hair."

The Westerner lighted a cigar, and offered one to Frank.

"Smoke?" he asked.

"No. Ain't learnt that trade yet. How far have we come from Chicago?"

"Don't know exactly. Near a couple of hundred miles."

"How far is it to St. Louis?"

"About a hundred more."

"That's all right. Get there some time before snoozing time.—A mighty fat country this we're passing through."

This set the Westerner off on a long story about the agricultural advantages of Illinois, which lasted until the conductor again came through the train at a point about thirty miles beyond Springfield.

"Show your tickets."

The passengers complied, and he made his way slowly through the car, punching tickets as he went, till—he suddenly paused, with a look of astonishment and indignation. He had caught sight of his late troublesome passenger.

"You here?" he cried, savagely.

"Yes. Told you we'd meet again, conductor."

"Didn't I put you off at Springfield?"

"Not if the court knows itself. It's my notion I got off."

"You said Springfield was your destination."

"So it was—for that ride. But I took a notion I'd like to go further with you. Struck a sort of fancy to you."

"The deuce you did!" growled the conductor.

"Your ticket, then."

"Ticket?"

"Yes, ticket."

"I haven't any. Train didn't stop long enough to get one."

"Money, then."

"Haven't any. Left all my funds in Chicago."

"Then you've got to git off this train."

"That's what I expect to do—when it stops. Ain't going to risk a jump, nohow."

"It's going to stop now, and here. I'm tired of this nonsense."

The conductor reached for the bell-rope, and pulled it fiercely. In a minute afterward the speed of the train had considerably slackened.

Frank sat with an unmoved face. This action did not seem to disturb him in the least.

"Have you really no ticket?" asked his new friend.

"Nary pasteboard."

"Nor money?"

"Not enough to strike fire with. I left all my money at the hotel in Chicago, and started off too quick to get it."

"Then, by the Rocky Mountains, I've had fun enough out of you to pay your way. What's the next stop, conductor?"

"Alton."

"Fare from Springfield?"

The conductor told him.

"All right. I'll pay this young man's way."

"Why the blazes didn't you say so sooner, then?" The train had nearly stopped. "I've half a mind to put him off as it is."

"You can't do it, conductor, and you know it. You've got to take the money," answered Frank, with provoking nonchalance.

The conductor in reply sprung up and jerked the bell-rope savagely, emitting a low growl.

Immediately the train began to gather speed again, and was soon driving on at full headway.

The passenger paid Frank's fare, and the conductor continued his round.

"I'm going to pay this back," said Frank. "Give me your name and address. I've got plenty of money in Chicago, but started off so fresh that I left it behind me."

"Never mind it. I've had my pay in fun."

"Yes, I will mind it. I'm not working my way nary time."

Alton was reached in due time, and the train again came to a halt. Frank rose to leave the car.

"I thought you were for St. Louis?" said his new friend.

"So I am. I'll get there, you bet."

"Stay aboard, then. I'll pay the rest of the way. It's only twenty-five miles."

"No. I won't sponge on good nature. You'll see me there."

"Better stay."

"Can't see it. Good-by. I'll send you that little remembrance."

"Never mind it. Good-by."

Frank got off. In a few minutes the train was away again.

"Gone this time, sure," said the conductor, as he made his last round through the train. "He's left behind at last."

"I'm not so certain of that," answered Frank's friend. "He's death at turning up. Have you looked on top the cars?"

Where he should have looked was on the engine, on which Frank had jumped as the train started, and where he remained in spite of the engineer's growl that no one had any business there.

"Lawsee, you needn't mind me," answered Frank merrily. "I ain't no more than a grasshopper, and I can't chirp loud enough to stop the train."

And he rattled on in such a lively and amusing way that the engineer, though he knew this was breaking the law of the road, let him remain.

"If you put me off, I'll finish my ride on the cow-catcher," averred Frank. "I'm for Pike's Peak, or bust. I ain't got no money, old hoss, but I'll owe you a thromo for this ride."

"How did you get this far without money?"

"Brass brought me through," answered Frank, and he told the engineer the story of his adventure with the conductor, much to that worthy's delight.

There was no longer any thought of putting him off. Frank paid his fare for the rest of the way by making things lively for the engineer and fireman.

At length the station at St. Louis was reached. The boy sprung from the engine before its wheels had ceased turning. It was rather dark at that point, and none of the station-hands observed him.

He hurried down the platform, and in a minute found himself face to face with the conductor, who stared at him like one in a trance of surprise.

"Told you I'd get here," he cried. "I'm royal pancakes at keeping my word. Good-by, old chap. Sorry I can't go back with you."

Frank was away before the conductor could muster words to reply.

The boy's next encounter was with his train friend, who gazed at him with almost as much surprise as the conductor had shown.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "You here?"

"Always keep my word," replied Frank. "I won't forget that little obligation."

"Never mind that; but, how did you get here?"

"Ask the engineer. Had a splendid ride behind the headlights, and—Good-by!"

Frank darted away hastily. He had at that moment caught sight of Mr. Converse, who had just left the cars and was hurrying through the station.

CHAPTER VII.

DOWN TO SHORT RATIONS.

FRANK had no difficulty in locating Mr. Converse in St. Louis. He followed him directly to the leading hotel of the city, where, as at Chicago, he registered under the name of Rowland Hill. So far the young detective had smooth sailing; but, what was to come next?

With but fifty cents in his pocket, he could not put up at that house, and his one source of difficulty was how he should live two days without coming to utter bankruptcy.

He could not afford to telegraph to Chicago for his money. But he might write. He could possibly keep soul and body together long enough to get an answer to a letter.

It was now well on into the night, but there was no time to lose. His letter must go out that night. Borrowing a sheet of paper, he wrote to the Chicago hotel proprietor the story of his sudden journey to St. Louis, asking him to Express the money-package and his gripsack at once, after taking out enough for his hotel bill.

This letter duly written and posted, Frank felt easier in mind. Where should he lodge? In fact, he could not afford to lodge at all, unless he was to go hungry the next day.

There were seats at the railway station. He could seem to be waiting for a train. That was a good idea. Frank hurried back to the station, curled himself into a seat, and was soon fast asleep.

It was considerably past midnight when a station-keeper awakened him.

"Come, sir; this is not a sleeping-place. You must get up."

The boy, who had laid his plans in advance, got up and stretched himself lazily.

"Guess it's 'most time for the train," he yawned.

"What train?"

"Alton accommodation."

"Why, bless you, boy, it went an hour ago."

"The gracious you say! Why didn't somebody wake me up?"

"That ain't our line of business. Everybody is expected to be wide-awake here."

"I'm left, that's all. Say, old chap, when does the next train go out?"

"Four o'clock."

"Then if I go to the hotel, I'll be left again. Guess I'll wait."

"Don't go to sleep this time."

"Go to sleep! What do you take me for? This ain't a sleepy eye, is it?"

The guard turned away with a laugh, while Frank once more coiled himself in his seat, and in five minutes was off in another snooze, from which he did not awake till six o'clock in the morning.

Then he was roused by a sharp shake from the guard.

"Well, Master Wide-awake, here you are still."

"What o'clock?" asked Frank, rubbing his eyes vigorously.

"Past six."

"You don't mean to say I've lost the train again?"

"It looks that way," laughed the guard.

"That's what comes of night travel. Got to take a daylight trip after all. Guess I'll go rake up a lunch. You bet I'll be wide-awake when I come round here again."

He was hungry enough to spend all his funds in one grand feast. But that would never do.

He invested five cents in rolls at a baker's shop, and made a dry meal at a very low figure. If he could go on at the same rate his funds would carry him through two or three days.

Frank spent that day on the track of Mr. Converse. Not a step outside the hotel was taken by that individual but what the young ferret was sharply after him, though the boy's day's work brought him little return.

The only thing he could note down at night was—Converse had stopped at a large wholesale dry goods house, and spent two hours in the private office, in close conference with the proprietor.

What took place there, he was, of course, in ignorance of, but the affair interested him. It was a step in the business that had brought this tricky personage to St. Louis.

Frank had told the Chicago hotel proprietor to direct his answer to the St. Louis hotel where Converse was stopping. He inquired of the clerk at six o'clock that evening.

"Are you a guest here?" asked the clerk.

"No, sir; but I wrote from here."

"I have a letter just in for that name. But how am I to know that you are the right party?"

"I can't say, except you take me on my face. Frank Melton's my name, and what I wrote for was some money I left behind me in Chicago. You can open the letter if you want to, and if it isn't about that, then I'm a fraud."

"Where did you leave it?"

"At the St. Claude Hotel."

"All right. This is for you, then."

He handed Frank a letter, which the boy eagerly opened and read hastily. As he did so his face fell.

"Bad news?" asked the clerk.

"Read that. He won't send it. Says he don't know if I'm the right party. What am I to do?"

"Trot back to Chicago, I fancy, and show your face there."

"I reckon it'll be a trot, then. Haven't fifty cents to my name."

The clerk looked him over with eyes of experience.

"You wear a watch, boy. What is it worth?"

"About a fifty, I reckon," said Frank, drawing it out.

"Then go see your uncle. He'll lend you a twenty on it."

"Bang my thick skull, why didn't I think of that myself? Much obliged, mister. I ain't up to pawning watches or I'd knowed that. Good-by."

Frank was away with a new idea in his head. But it didn't stay there long. He had been put on the track of Jacob P. Converse. What might become of his quest if he left the trail for a trip to Chicago and back?

He halted, in deep cogitation. There was Dick Wister; why not telegraph him for money? It was a fertile idea. Frank resolved to do it the next morning. It was too late to wire Dick at his office that night.

The boy, who had now but twenty-five cents left, spent that night as he had the night before, but in a different station. At an early business hour of the next day he put his watch in pawn, as the clerk had suggested, receiving fifteen dollars, which was the most the careful pawnbroker could see in it.

Frank celebrated his victory immediately by a good breakfast. He then sought the telegraph office, and sent Dick Wister the following message:

"Dead broke. Send me some money."

It was two hours before the following answer came:

"The deuce you are! Four hundred dollars in a week! Do you think we sleep here on gold mines? Explain."

"Left it at hotel in Chicago. Daren't leave here to go after it," wired Frank in reply.

"You young scapegrace!" was Dick's answer. "I'll see Borden, but I don't believe he'll pony up. The squeeze is too tight."

Frank left the office in a fret. Dick might have trusted him, and sent him some out of his own pocket. And yet, he said to himself, that wasn't Dick Wister's way. He had the fashion of holding on to his dollars.

What was to be done? Mr. Borden was not likely to hand out money at such a rate. Should he go to Chicago?—what, and leave Converse unwatched? No, not if he had to lunch on his sleeve-buttons and sleep in an ash-barrel.

Frank's watchfulness that day yielded no results, other than that he saw Converse again enter the merchant's office, remain there a few minutes, and come out in his company.

They walked together down the street for a block or two, and then separated. It was a prosperous-looking gentleman whom Converse had now in tow. That was all the boy learned.

Several days passed with no further points gained. Then the young detective dropped on something of more importance. He met Converse near the Chicago and Alton station, and with him his Chicago acquaintance, who had evidently just arrived.

They were in earnest conversation, and the curious boy pushed up close behind them, as once before. They talked in their usual tones, and he had no difficulty in following their words.

"I shall probably be here for several days longer," remarked Converse. "Then I must strike for New Orleans and see Brown."

"The plant is working satisfactorily, you say?"

"Splendidly; that's the word I got yesterday from the works. I have not had a chance to get there myself, but, as sure as you live, our top-price for the metal will be ten cents a pound.

Maybe not over five. I'd like to have more money to put in it, that's all."

"How much can you and Wilson raise?"

"Not over fifty thousand, I fear."

"So far as I'm concerned," answered the other, "I'll not put a red penny in till I see it's working and am satisfied. That's my way. If your words turn out worth their face value, I won't hesitate to invest a cool hundred thousand."

"That's business, friend Johnson. I like you for it. The plant will be in good working order about the end of March. Then I shall expect all of you gentlemen at—"

Frank unfortunately lost the last word. The name of the place where this mysterious "plant" was to be seen remained unknown to him.

"By the way, do you know Gordon?" asked Converse.

"No. Never saw him."

"Then you must. As you are likely to sail in the same boat, you should be friends in advance. And here's his store now. Come in. I'll introduce you, and we can chat over the enterprise."

It was the store within which Converse had had so much business during the past few days that they now entered.

Frank stood outside, in doubt whether he had better wait for them or not. He finally concluded that there was nothing to be gained by this. There was matter of more importance to consider.

He had heard that morning from Dick Wister by wire, saying that Borden had refused to advance any more. He would send him on his own account twenty dollars in a registered letter, which was all he could spare.

"That's very generous in Dick," growled the boy. "But, maybe he don't quite believe me. I did play the fool act, that's sure. Converse says he'll be here several days yet. That'll give me plenty time for a run to Chicago. Here goes."

He had made up his mind on the jump, and sought the railroad station in the same prompt manner. Here he was informed that the next Express for Chicago would not go out till ten o'clock that evening.

"And it's not four yet," thought the boy. "Well, I don't need to be so blazing mean now, and I judge I'll go order a prime-up old supper. I'm hungry all the way down."

At ten that evening he stepped aboard the train with more assurance than on the former occasion, for he had a through sleeping-car ticket in his pocket, and was a few dollars still on the right side of poverty.

Before daybreak the next morning he landed in Chicago. An abundant breakfast at the station restaurant braced him up for the business of the day, and at eight o'clock sharp he made his appearance in the hotel.

"Do you recognize me?" he asked the clerk.

"I've seen your face before," was the doubtful answer.

"And wanted to see it again; for you've made me run back here from St. Louis to show it."

"How?"

"Here's your letter. That will show."

The clerk looked at the letter; then at Frank; and then laughed.

"It was business, young man. There was too much cash to take chances on. Somebody might have stolen your secret and your name. I know you now, and it is all right. Here is your package."

"All correct," answered Frank, cheerily, after counting the money. "What's your divvy? Let's see the size of your bill."

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM CHICAGO TO NEW ORLEANS.

WITH a pocket full of money and a heart full of satisfaction, Frank Melton spent the remainder of that day in taking a general survey of Chicago. He had abundant time, he thought, and might never have the chance again.

Early the next morning he mounted the Day Express for St. Louis, and once more rolled out over the prairie level of Illinois.

He was busily engaged in reading the morning paper when the conductor came round to punch tickets. It was the same high-minded official with whom Frank had had his previous adventure.

On seeing the quiet smile that lighted up the boyish face before him, the conductor stopped in surprise and anger.

"You here again?" he exclaimed.

"How d'ye do?" asked Frank. "Fine morning!"

"A fine one for a tramp," answered the conductor, wrathfully, as he gave a violent pull at the bell-rope.

"Ah! going to take a tramp?" asked Frank, innocently.

"No; but you are."

The train slackened speed, and within a minute or two came to a halt.

"Now, Master Impudence, you'll get off."

"Master who?"

"Impudence."

"I don't know any chap of that name," said Frank, turning to his paper.

"Come here!" called the conductor to the brakeman. "Here's a fellow trying to beat the road. We've got to fire him."

"See here, Mr. Emperor!" remarked Frank; "s'pose you just quit barking at the moon, and come down to terry firmy. Look at that, and lay a finger on me if you dare!"

He held his ticket under the conductor's nose. That gentleman fell back a step, in surprise and chagrin.

"Why didn't you show me that before?" he demanded, clutching desperately at the bell-rope.

"You never asked me for it."

"I did."

"See here, gentlemen," Frank appealed to the surrounding passengers. "Did any of you hear him ask me?"

"No!" was the general answer.

"Now punch that ticket," demanded Frank, sternly. "And don't you tap me like you did t'other day, or I'll punch your head."

"None of your impertinence, boy."

"And none of your crowding. You're a good deal too previous. Why, I've got money enough to buy up your old road—if I wanted it. But I ain't investing in no such slow hosses."

Frank turned again to his paper; and the conductor, swallowing his rage, resumed his rounds, after signaling the engineer to start up again. He recognized that he had been too hasty, and that the boy had the best of the game.

The young traveler had no more difficulty with his foe, who contented himself during the remainder of the journey with growling demands of "Ticket," to each of which Frank responded with a seraphic smile, and a show of his pasteboard.

In due time the train drew into the station at St. Louis, and the youthful detective once again trod the soil of Missouri. The day was now well advanced, and he was hungry enough for two of his size, having eaten only a sandwich on his journey.

His first errand, then, was to a restaurant, where he obtained a plentiful meal. His next was to the pawnbroker's, where he redeemed his watch. His third was to the post-office, where he found Dick Wister's registered letter awaiting him. His fourth was to the hotel, where he looked carefully round him for Mr. Converse.

No trace of that individual was to be seen, however. Frank grew a little uneasy. Could he have left? On all previous evenings he had found him in the smoking-room.

"Mr. Rowland Hill?" said the clerk, in response to Frank's question. "Left to-day."

"Left?"

"Yes. Six hours ago. Is on his way down the river. Took steamer Alabama for New Orleans."

"The thunder!" cried Frank. "Left, as I'm a sinner!"

"Want to see him bad?" queried the clerk.

"Mighty bad."

"Chase him, then. The St. Clair steams out at 6 o'clock. It is a faster boat than the Alabama. You'll touch wharf at New Orleans first, if you don't overhaul him before. Or you can go by rail, if you prefer."

"A steamboat ride down the Mississippi!" cried Frank in enthusiasm. "Don't say rail to me! I wouldn't miss it for ten railroads. Good-by! Much obliged."

It was now four o'clock. Before six Frank had secured a state-room on the large and handsome steamer St. Clair, placed his baggage in his berth, and was seated on the saloon-deck, waiting to see the boat pull out.

Day was just breaking when he woke next morning. Hastily dressing, he sought the deck of the boat, and stood by the forward rails, earnestly watching the scene revealed to his eyes.

Down the mighty river the boat drove in swift career, its speed doubled by the rapid current, while the low lands on either side seemed to glide past in an upward flow as the steamer sped rapidly downward.

The young passenger soon got tired of looking

at the unwooded and monotonous banks, and turned his attention to the boat on which he stood. The broad deck was thickly covered with merchandise in the greatest variety, while around him, enjoying the morning air, stood dozens of passengers, bound for various river ports.

One of these soon attracted his special attention. He stared at him a moment, and then sprung cheerily forward.

"Hello, old man!" he cried. "Here's room for your ten fingers."

He held out his hand.

The man addressed turned, stared, and then clutched Frank's hand. It was his railroad acquaintance!

"Glad to see you," he exclaimed. "Ain't trying to beat the boat as you did the road, eh?"

"Not much!" Frank laughed. "Got the ducats now. By the way, here's your little provender."

"Oh, never mind that," said the Westerner, as Frank drew out a well-filled pocket-book.

"Yes, I will! Short accounts make long friends. I came over the road again yesterday, old man, and you ought to have been along. I took every speck of starch out of that conductor, and left him just the limpest individual you ever seen."

He told the story of his late encounter, at which Mr. Palmer, his listener, almost doubled himself with laughter.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Somewhere over eighteen."

"By the Rocky Mountains, you're an old traveler, if you are a young man! I'm turned fifty-eight, and I couldn't have done it."

The two sought the saloon deck and seated themselves for a comfortable talk. Meanwhile, the boat sped rapidly on its course, plunging through the mighty waters, and unfolding an endless panorama of farming and meadow-lands on either side.

"Do you know the Alabama?" asked Frank.

"Yes, I just missed taking it."

"Why? We'll get to New Orleans first."

"Not much! The Alabama's a faster boat than this!"

"Then that hotel clerk lied, for he told me the St. Clair was the best boat on the river."

"Got stock in it, maybe," answered Palmer, lighting a cigar. "Smoke?"

"No."

Frank fell into a momentary train of thought. Was he destined to be beaten after all? Had he better leave the boat at some river town, and take the train?

But he had bought a through ticket; and he wanted to see the river. His moment's reflection ended in a resolve to stick to the boat and trust to luck for the future. He felt sure of finding Converse at some New Orleans hotel.

"I get off at Memphis," remarked Mr. Palmer, after smoking for some minutes in silence. "Glad of your company for so far. What are you interested in the Alabama for?"

"There's a man aboard her whom I want to beat to New Orleans."

"Ah! a race, hey? Who is it?"

"He calls himself Rowland Hill."

"The deuce he does!" Mr. Palmer started as if his cigar had burned him. "What do you know about him?"

His voice was sharply inquisitive.

Frank grew suddenly cautious. He might have been talking too fast.

"Got a little bet with him, that's all," he said, indifferently. "Friend of yours, Mr. Palmer?"

"That's more than I can say. A business acquaintance is a better word. I'm to meet him at Louisville at the end of March in a little business deal."

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"Business is business, my boy. I can't let out other men's secrets. All I'll say is that if Rowland Hill's plans pan out well, more than one man will be rich; and I'll be one of them."

"Something about metal?"

"You know of it, then? Have you ever seen aluminum, the new metal?"

"Don't know as I have."

"It is extracted from clay. Costs nothing for material. All the cost is in getting it out, and that's mighty expensive. But there's a big market for it now at fifty cents a pound, for it's a very useful metal. Suppose it could be made at five or ten cents a pound."

"Somebody would get rich," answered Frank.

"That's what I think," rejoined Palmer.

This was the end of the Westerner's revela-

tions. Frank was afraid to say more, though he believed in his secret soul that Converse was working up a plot to victimize a number of rich Western merchants.

Palmer also had nothing further to say on the subject. Yet his few words had taught much to the quick-witted boy. Louisville was the place, the end of March the time, and a plant for making cheap aluminum the means.

But how was the game to be worked? that was the next thing to learn. And what had Clarkson, the Artful Dodger, to do with it?

That afternoon Frank wrote a long letter to Dick Wister, telling him the story of his journey, and what he had learned. He bade him try and get a free foot to come West in late March. This letter he dropped in the mail-box of the boat.

We cannot dwell longer on Frank's Mississippi experience. It was a new and fertile one, and he never wearied of watching the great river, or its ever-changing banks; now low, now rising into great bluffs; now bare, now densely wooded; now deserted, now with groups of houses; now bustling villages, now busy cities, lining the way.

Palmer left at Memphis, as he had said. Frank, who had taken a fancy to him, bade him a hearty good-by.

"By the way," he said, "I will be up the river myself in a week or two, and may stop at Louisville. When do you expect to be there?"

"March 20th, or thereabouts."

"With a pocket full of five-cent aluminum, eh?"

"If I had, I wouldn't trade it for gold."

"Good-by, then. If I get there I'll look for you."

League after league they plunged along their watery way, the weather growing warmer as they reached a more southern latitude. It was like a May-day in the North when, on a day in early March, the St. Clair rounded up to her wharf in New Orleans, pushing her sharp nose in between two other great steamers.

She had passed many a boat on the way, but no one on board had set eye on the Alabama. Could it have been passed in the night? Frank soon settled this question by asking a wharf official.

"Alabama? Three blocks above. Come in at seven this morning, ten hours ago."

"Dished again," said the boy to himself. "But, I'll find him, if he's hid in one of General Jackson's cotton-bales."

CHAPTER IX.

A RAT IN A TRAP.

A WEEK has passed since Frank Melton landed in New Orleans. During that week he has investigated the city thoroughly in a vain effort to find the lost object of his journey. He has called at every hotel, large and small, but none of Converse's known names are on their registers, nor has he been able to catch a glimpse of the well-known form, though he has hung like a shadow for hours around the doors of the leading hotels.

He has traversed the city from end to end, tracing the winding and sleepy streets of the French quarter, with their wealth of flowers and tropical foliage; and the straight and wide-awake streets of the English quarter, with their business bustle. He has tramped on foot from the site of General Jackson's cotton-bale barricades on the south to the park-like world's fair grounds on the north. He has followed the line of the great river from end to end of the city. Yet, among the multitudes of faces that have met his eyes, none resembling that of Jacob P. Converse has been visible.

Though the month was March, it felt like a June day of the North, when the boy stopped, weary and disgusted, and leaned against a sturdy tree-trunk, while his eyes dwelt lazily on a verdant group of orange trees in a broad garden before him.

"He wouldn't have come all the way down here to turn on his heels and peg out again the very next day," he cogitated.

"But, if he's here, where is he? That's the little conundrum I'd like somebody to answer. Not in a hotel, that's sure. I won't give up yet, though. New Orleans is a big spread, and I might have passed within a block of him twenty times without seeing him. Maybe it'd be best for me to anchor somewhere and wait. Who knows but the tide of travel might sweep him round past me?"

With this new idea in his head he continued to lean against the tree, his eyes fixed dreamily upon the glossy foliage of the orange grove, while a vision of tropical luxuriance floated through his youthful fancy.

In that mood he was in no frame of mind to observe the moving tide of life, and numbers of people passed him unseen by his heedless eyes.

Not until half an hour and more had elapsed was he called to a wide-awake sense of the situation, and this by a voice that addressed him in much surprise.

"Ha, young fellow! how in the world did you get here? And what are you doing in New Orleans?"

Frank looked quickly up. There, before him, stood the form of the man for whom he had been so long looking—Jacob P. Converse! He was gazing on him with a look of astonishment.

"Aren't you the same young hero who plunged into the hotel fire in New York and saved my box for me? Of course you are; I don't forget faces easily, and yours is not a common one."

While these words were being spoken, Frank's brain had been busily working. His first impulse was to deny his identity, and claim to be on his native soil. But the last words of the speaker caused him to change his mind. If he did not want to raise suspicion, and perhaps defeat his purpose, he had best face the music.

"Are you the gentleman?" he asked, with a well-acted show of surprise. "Yes, I know you now. But I did not expect to meet you here."

"Nor I you."

"Oh, we have moved here. Came away from New York right after that fire. Going to live here, Mr. Converse?"

"Oh, no! I'm only on some business. But it did give me a start to see you. The world's a narrow one, after all."

"I should think so," spoke a quiet voice near him. "Are you just finding that out, friend Hill?"

Frank, with a sudden impulse, turned his face away from this new speaker and looked intently down the street. He did so with a purpose. He wished to gain control of his features. In fact, it was only by great command of himself that he kept from a sharp start of surprise—for the voice he heard was the well-remembered one of John P. Clarkson, the Artful Dodger!

Some further words passed between the two men, while Frank was repressing the signs of delight and surprise which marked his face at this important discovery, and trying to lay out a plan of action.

There was no use trying to get away. He must face the music, and trust to luck that Clarkson would not recognize him. After a minute he turned and looked him full in the face.

Yes, there was that same smooth, good-looking and benevolent countenance he had known so well a year before. The man before him was undoubtedly the Artful Dodger with whom he had had much to do in his early detective life, and who was just then badly wanted by the authorities of New York.

Clarkson looked at the boy with no sign of recognition on his quiet face.

"You know this young gentleman, Hill?" he asked.

"I should think so. He did me a valuable service last month."

Mr. Converse told, in few words, the story of the fire and of Frank's heroic act.

"By my honor, a brave lad!" ejaculated Clarkson, heartily. "Give me your hand, boy. I like to hear of courage like that."

"Mercy, it wasn't nothing to brag of," answered Frank, diffidently, extending his hand with some reluctance.

"Don't spoil the merit of your deed by over-modesty, my lad," replied Clarkson, shaking his hand heartily. "By the way, Hill, you ought to have rewarded this brave fellow well for such an act."

"Reward him! He would not listen to the word!" answered Converse.

"There are some things people do for money; some that can't be paid for with money," rejoined Frank, modestly.

"Very true. Very well put. Are you engaged in business, my modest lad?"

"No; I am looking for a situation."

"Then, by my honor, you shall have one! Say, Hill, we want an intelligent youth, and I fancy this is just the one we need. There are letters to deliver, messages, and so on. Will you engage with us, young man? We will give you six dollars a week for a start?"

"Make it eight, and I'll take it."

"Eight—eight—that's steep. I don't know if you'll be worth it to us. What say you, Hill? Shall we try him one week at that rate?"

"As you please, Mr. Wilson; I leave it with you."

"Come with us, then. We'll give you a week's trial.—What's your name?"

"Joe, they call me at home."

"Very well. A week's trial, mine."

"All right, said Frank. "I'm not afraid but I'll suit you."

He had been thinking earnestly during the last few minutes. Did Clarkson know him? There was not the least sign in his face or manner that he did. To all appearance he was honest in his wish for a messenger boy.

But, Frank was not quite at ease in his mind. Converse had displayed a passing show of surprise at his friend's suggestion. The boy knew well that he had two deep rogues to deal with, and that he must not take appearances for facts. But there seemed here such a promise of opportunity to penetrate the designs of these villains that he could not hesitate. Had he been offered a dollar a week he would have accepted.

The three new friends walked away—Hill and Wilson, as the two men had named themselves, and Joe, as the boy had chosen to designate himself. He could not venture to trust his real name in Clarkson's hearing.

They had not far to go. In fact, Frank had unwittingly stopped within a few steps of their place of abode. They made their way to the house adjoining the garden into which he had been gazing, opened the door, and entered, asking him to follow.

It was a roomy mansion in which he now found himself, with a broad center hall, and ranges of wide apartments on either side. The furniture was not abundant, but was tastefully chosen, and was cool and comfortable, as befitted the climate.

It seemed like the residence of a gentleman of considerable wealth and of good taste.

"This way, Joe," said Clarkson, ascending the broad flight of stairs that opened upon the hall.

He led the way up there, and then up a second flight, to the upper floor of the mansion.

"This will be your room, my lad." As he spoke he opened the door of a small apartment, and led the way in. "Where are you living now?"

Frank named a street on the other side of the city.

"Well, you will not want to go home."

"But I must; to report and get my clothes."

"You need not; just now, at any rate. We will want you to-day. Make yourself at home here."

He stepped from the room, with his most benevolent smile, closed the door quietly behind him, and—the boy's quick ears heard the click of the lock!

He was locked in!

Startled at this, he looked hastily about him. Had Clarkson known him and been playing on him? Was he caught like a rat in a trap?

His eyes ran over the room, taking in all its details at a glance.

Yet in effect he saw only one thing. This was a second door, on the opposite side of the room. It was closed, but the key stood in the lock. It took but a second for him to spring to it, try the latch and find it to be locked, and draw out the key, which he thrust under the mattress of the cot on the opposite side of the room.

Hardly had he done so, when the entrance door was again opened and Clarkson stepped in, Converse remaining in the doorway.

Without a word Clarkson walked across the room and tried the opposite door.

"Locked," he said, with an air of satisfaction. "That's good. I was afraid some one might disturb you."

"But—" Frank's voice seemed to quaver. "But—didn't you lock that door? What was that for?"

"One door is locked to keep anybody from disturbing you; the other, to keep you from disturbing anybody else," answered Clarkson, with a meaning laugh. "Good-day, Joe! We'll come for you when we want you."

He slipped out as he spoke, and again locked the door behind him.

"Will you?" said Frank, quietly, to himself. "The Artful Dodger's a mighty good name for you, Mr. Clarkson, but I'm not bad on the dodge myself, and if I ain't got the bulge on you this time there's no use talking. Here's the right bower, and the game's mine."

He drew the key from under the mattress, and waved it in the air triumphantly.

Meanwhile the two men had descended to the second floor, and entered a room there.

"Now," said Converse, "I'd like an explanation. What does this move mean?"

"It means that we were very near being put

in a hole, my friend," answered Clarkson, quietly. "That boy walked into my trap. If he hadn't, our cake might have been all dough!"

"Explain yourself. I don't understand."

"It is just this: that young hound, whom you last saw in New York, and whom you found to-day with his eyes on this house, isn't the saint he seems to be, but one of the liveliest little imps out of Satan's dominions. He has followed you here from New York, and would have run you to earth, if I had not stepped in."

"I really don't see—"

"You shall, then. The boy is a protégé of one of the keenest of the New York detectives, and is as sharp as his master. I knew him at sight, though I played off on him successfully. It was he that ran me down last year, and if I'd gone to prison I'd had him to thank for it. It's my turn now. I've got the young rat in limbo. There he'll stay till we end this job. After it's done I don't know but I'll make an end of him for good and all. We're not safe while that boy is above ground."

There was a dangerous look on Clarkson's face as he spoke.

CHAPTER X.

THE PROWLING OF A CAT.

A WEEK passed away during which Frank Melton continued, to all seeming, a close prisoner in the room into which the Artful Dodger had so artfully led him. Daily, at proper intervals, a surly-faced colored individual brought him very spare and frugal meals. It seemed as if, for purposes of their own, his captors wished to keep him on very short rations.

As for Clarkson and Converse, they never came near him; nor, at the end of the week, did the eight dollars contracted for make its appearance. As for the messages and letters he was to deliver, he heard no more of them.

The negro who waited on him was a silent fellow, of a brutal cast of countenance. Frank did not fail to question him, with a show of distress and indignation, but failed to get a word of answer. The negro would deposit his food on the table, and leave the room as silently as if he was deaf and dumb.

But, sharp as were his jailers, they were not as sharp as their prisoner. His possession of the key to the rear door of his prison gave Frank full command of the situation. As for the dry and coarse food that was brought him he made only a pretense of eating it—thrusting the most of it under his bed. He had found his way to the pantry, and every night ended his daily fast by a plentiful feast from its contents.

In fact, long before the end of the week, Frank knew that mansion as thoroughly as if he were its owner. He had traversed it by day and by night, with the quiet step of a cat and the cunning of a fox, now hiding from some approaching step, now venturing boldly onward, till he had been in its every room without being seen by an inmate.

This could not have been easily done had there been many people in the house. But he soon learned that, besides his two enemies, who were absent most of the time, the only others in the house were his surly keeper, and a colored cook in the kitchen. He, therefore, had no great trouble in doing his spying and foraging unseen.

It was his game, however, to remain a prisoner. The pair of rogues fancied they had him safe, and it was well to keep them in that idea. If they should once suspect him they might take dangerous precautions.

Yet Frank was in a quandary. What did it all mean? What were they doing here? How came they in possession of this mansion? What was the next step on their programme? All this he asked himself, but with no answer.

"Playing rat in a hole is a mighty pretty game, where there's good nibbling," he muttered discontentedly. "But it begins to look to me as if I'm wasting my time. I thought I'd hear them let out some secrets, but I haven't. I'd not stay here a day longer only I want to keep their optics shut."

He became silent, and sat in reflection for some minutes.

"I've a notion they're waiting for something or somebody, and I'd like to know what," he resumed. "It's getting near the time they set to make tracks for Louisville. What's at the bottom of it, anyhow? Guess I'll take another stroll. Mr. Midnight brought me my grub an hour ago. He won't be here again these six hours."

It took him but a minute to find the key in its hiding place, unlock the door, and slip out from

the room. He locked the door carefully behind him.

He now found himself in a short entry, which led to a platform at the head of a flight of back stairs. Listening a moment, and hearing no sound, he slipped down these. He knew his way thoroughly, having traversed these stairs often before. In a minute or so he was on the lower floor of the mansion, in a small room adjoining the kitchen.

His last steps had been taken with great caution, for he heard voices near him. The tone and accent of these he recognized. The two colored servants were having a chat in the kitchen.

Frank's first impulse was to turn away. He had listened to them before and heard nothing of value. But he told himself that a true detective neglects no opportunity, and stole nearer to learn the subject of their conversation.

"For de Lawd!" came to him in the rich tones of the cook, "I don't make it out, nohow. Things does disappear, amazin'. Why, bress your soul, a whole pie went last night, an' mose a panful o' sweet cakes. I'd think it was you, Pomp, for a fac', on'y you do fill up so amazin' at supper."

"I neber eat pies, and you know it, Lidy," came in the hoarse tones of the man. "It's jiss rats, dat's what."

"See yere, Pomp. S'pose you put two pies togedder, d'ye think rats 'd eat one and not touch t'oder? It's two-legged rats, sure's you lib! Tell yer what, I've mose a mind to physic somethin' thar, an' catch dat t'ief."

"Mighty good, Lidy," cried Pomp, with a hoarse laugh. "Dose it heavy, ole woman. But I don't see how anybody kin git thar, r'aly."

"No more do I," answered the woman. "Nobody'd think gemmen 'd do sich low-down work. But them two men as massa's giv the key of the house to—"

"You don't s'pect dem, Lidy?"

"Who else am I to s'pect, tell me?" asked Lidy. "Who am dem men, anyhow, and what's dey arter here?"

"I jedge Marse Brown knows dat," answered the man. "If he wanted you an' me ter know, he'd told us. Tell you dis, old woman, he's a-comin' back to-day."

"Marse Brown?"

"Sure's you lib! I jis' got word."

"Glad he is, 'kaze I'm tired o' cookin' fur dem no-count Yankees."

"Hush!—Dat's 'em now, shore."

This warning was given on account of the sound of an opening door in the front part of the house. It was followed by steps and voices.

"It's dem; and Marse Brown wid 'em, sartain," averred Pomp.

"Den I's glad ob it," answered Lidy. "Dem men don't 'preciate good cookin'; an' I r'aly b'lieve it's dem dat's been ransackin' de pantry."

The real rat who had robbed the pantry was gliding away as she spoke, making up his mind as he did so not to disturb it for a night or two. He had no fancy to try Aunt Lidy's "physic."

He had something else in view. The proprietor of the mansion had returned, in company with the two sharpers. Possibly an important conference was about to be held. If so, Frank was bound to be a listener, if possible.

As he glided with a catlike step up the rear stairway, he heard the three men somewhat noisily ascend the front one, talking in loud voices as they did so. This suited his ideas. He would be less likely to be discovered by the servants on the second than on the first floor.

From the door of a room into which he glided, the young spy observed them step from the stairway into the upper hall, and advance toward a room looking upon the street. Two of them he recognized at sight as Converse and Clarkson. The third was a tall, well-built man, who walked with a heavy tread.

They entered the room and closed the door behind them. They had hardly done so before Frank glided hastily forward.

He knew thoroughly what he was about. He had not investigated the house for nothing. There was a rear room behind that which they had entered, with a communicating door.

Into this Frank slipped noiselessly. To his satisfaction, the door between the two rooms stood slightly ajar, and the men were talking so loudly that he heard every word they spoke.

There was a closet in the wall near the door. Into this he glided, as a hiding-place in case the

room should be invaded—leaving the door an inch or two open.

"Johnson and Gordon want twenty-five per cent. of the shares each," came to him in Clarkson's voice. "They are so sure it is a good thing that they are eager to put up the cash."

"Have you promised them?" asked a strange voice—doubtless that of Mr. Brown.

"Promised them? no! No single party can have more than twenty. Hill and I haven't the funds to hold what we'd like, but we'll not be satisfied with less than twenty."

"You are sure—" began Mr. Brown.

"Sure?" interrupted Converse. "You have only to read this letter from our agent. The last firing, he says, yielded two pounds of pure aluminum to the batch, which he considers a clear ninety-five per cent. of all the metal present. Sure? Why, sir, I wouldn't exchange my interest for a gold-mine."

The rustle of paper followed, as if Mr. Brown was reading the letter.

"That sounds promising, I admit," he remarked. "I tell you, gentlemen, I feel like going in with you. I have raised the funds, so there's no trouble about them. But, I must be sure. It is too big a thing—"

"You shall be sure before the week ends," broke in Clarkson. "We start to-morrow—if that suits you."

"That will answer. I have nothing to detain me here."

Frank's greedy ears drank in all this. He had left the closet and advanced step by step to the door of the apartment, fearing to lose a word of the conversation—but nothing more of importance came to his ears.

The three men continued to talk, but only on technical points connected with the new process of manufacturing aluminum. In the end Mr. Brown rose, saying:

"Twenty per cent. of the shares is your limit, then?"

"It wouldn't be ten, if we had the funds to carry more," answered Clarkson. "But we've got to have the cash for a large developing plant."

"I may take twenty, if I am satisfied," rejoined Mr. Brown. "Now, gentlemen, I have some orders for my servants. Help yourselves to cigars. You'll find some good ones in that box."

He rose and left the room. The confederates remained silent for a minute after he had gone. Then Converse broke into a low laugh.

"He bites deep!" he said.

"Into a Dead Sea apple," was the answer.

"Next week—" began Converse.

"Next week the plant will develop," laughed Clarkson. "But not in the way they fancy. This is play, Jack. Work is about to begin."

"You are not nervous about it?"

"Nervous?—I have no nerves. It is a critical job, but, with our precautions it must succeed."

"And these dupes be bled. But there is one thing more. That boy—"

"Brown will not discover him. He never sets foot on the third floor of the building. I tell you, Jack, I am afraid of that boy. He must go under. That black fellow will do anything for money. It is but a pinch of white powder in his food, and—"

"You would not kill him?" broke in Converse.

"No. But if he goes asleep too deep to awaken—the negro will be responsible, and must dispose of him."

"But—"

"Come, come; are you losing your grip? There's Brown's step, now. Let us go down and join him."

They left the room and descended the stairs.

"I haven't eat much of your grub. I'll stop eating any of it," said Frank, with set teeth.

"So they mean murder, do they?"

CHAPTER XI.

FROM DURANCE TO LIBERTY.

"WE owe you—eight dollars I think it is," said Clarkson, in a tone of sarcasm to his young prisoner. "I can scarcely say you have earned it, for we have given you little to do, but—"

"But I've gnawed your dry grub, and that's worth eight dollars a week," growled Frank in reply.

It was the day succeeding that of the events of the last chapter. The two confederates had visited Frank in his room.

"As for your money," resumed Clarkson, advancing toward the prisoner, while Converse guarded the doorway.—"By the way, have you any money?" He suddenly seized the boy,

pinioning his arms. "If you have, we had better take care of it. It is not safe with you here."

Frank struggled to get loose, but he was held in a grip far too strong for him to break. He struggled the more when Converse came up and sought to search his pockets. But, in spite of the boy's kicking and squirming, his captors were too strong for him, and in a very few minutes his money was in their hands.

"Mercy on us, he is well provided!" exclaimed Clarkson, surprised at the thick roll of notes. "Too much money—entirely too much—for any boy to carry."

"I will get even with you for this!" growled Frank savagely.

"No doubt, my child.—What! he carries a watch, too? You surely do not need to know the time here, and it will be of so much use to us."

In a moment Frank's watch went the road of his money.

"You're a nice pair of blacklegs," said Frank, sarcastically. "Here's a handkercher; wouldn't you like that? And there's some buttons in that left-hand pocket. Go ahead, foot-pads!"

"We wouldn't think of depriving you," answered Clarkson. "We are going North this afternoon, my lad, but you'll be left in good hands. Pomp will take the best of care of ye.—When we come back—"

"I'd like to know what you're keeping me here for?" broke in Frank savagely. "What right have you to lock me up here?"

"It is only to keep you out of mischief. New Orleans isn't a safe city for little boys to run loose. Try and content yourself; we'll see you when we come back, Joe." There was a meaning emphasis on the Joe.

With these words they left the room, locking the door carefully behind them. Frank remained alone.

There was a look on his face of mingled triumph and vexation.

"Robbed me, blast their pictures!" he exclaimed. "Haven't even left my watch, and I've got nothing to lend my uncle.—But they didn't tumble to my little secret, and I've got the bulge on them yet. I'm going to Louisville, if I have to walk, or work my way on a flatboat."

"But, there isn't time for that. Things are getting hot and I must go by train. I wonder if I can beat the conductor again, like I did before? Anyhow, I'm going, if I have to hang on by my teeth to the cowcatcher."

It was now about ten o'clock in the morning. His next visit from his dark-visaged jailer would be at one. Should he give the place leg-bail at once? His inclination led that way, but it might not be wise. Clarkson and Converse might still be in town, and his escape be reported to them. After full consideration he concluded to wait, and make his flight in the afternoon.

But the next three hours were about the longest Frank ever spent. His anxiety to be off was so great that it seemed to him the mid-day meal would never come. The minutes crept by so slowly that he was sure it must be the sunset hour when a neighboring clock began on the stroke of twelve.

The next hour moved still more tardily. Fortunately for his peace of mind, Pomp was prompt, and made his appearance at the stroke of one.

To the boy's surprise he brought, instead of the dry bread and water of former meals, a toothsome lunch of sliced ham, buttered biscuit, and cake, with a cup of steaming coffee for beverage.

"Hello, old Midnight!" cried Frank; "what sort of a blow-out is this? Going to fatten me up to kill, eh?"

"It's tole to fotch it, and I's done it," growled Pomp, in a harsh tone. "Dar it am; make de most of it."

"You bet I will. If they'd only sent a cut o' pumpkin pie instead of that thin stuff of cake! When are you coming to see me again, Midnight?"

"Dat ain't my name," responded Pomp, stalking away with dignity, and locking the door behind him.

"It ain't white rose, anyhow; or pond lily."

Frank stood looking with queer regards at the lunch.

"Mighty enticing you are," he said, "but I happened to hear something about a pinch of white powder.—Reckon I won't indulge.—And Mrs. Cook said she'd physic the pies in the pantry.—Somehow I think eating in this house

ain't good for the liver. I'll leave this grub for Pomp."

He took his hat, sought his ulster in the closet in which it hung, and threw it across his arm, and then thrust his hand under the mattress for the key. He paused with his hand in that position, as if struck by a sudden thought.

"By jiminy, overcoats ain't no use in this climate! I wonder what mine'll fetch? Not much I reckon, but a couple of dollars'd count now."

This said, he withdrew his hand with the key, inserted it in the lock, and opened the door.

Within five minutes afterward the young detective stood in the street before the mansion, having without difficulty made his way from the house unseen.

What was to be done next? The conspirators had for the time escaped him, but he knew where to find them. What he had to do was to get to Louisville as quickly as he could.

There was the ulster. To dispose of that was the first consideration. Frank went into this business with a vim, and in an hour's time had found a customer—at the low price of five dollars. The garment had cost twenty-five less than a month ago.

Should he spend this to get as far North as it would take him? No, he had to eat, and could spare no money for railroading. He must find a cheaper method of traveling.

This thought brought another into his brain, Dick Wister—he would be needed. Frank hastened to the telegraph-office, and spent part of his slender funds in sending a message to Dick in New York. It was to this purport:

"Start at once for Louisville. The pear's ripe and ready for pulling. Look for me at main hotel. Answer."

The answer was two hours in coming. It ran as follows:

"Am free now, and will be there. Glad all's well. WISTER."

"So far good," said Frank, with much satisfaction. "Dick'll be worth a whole ox-team. Now I've got to get some grub, an' it's got to be cheap. Got no money to waste."

In an hour afterward, with his appetite satisfied, Frank appeared at the station of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad.

An Express train for the North stood on the track, with steam up in the locomotive. Passengers were hurrying through the gate. Just as Frank entered the main door of the station his quick eyes caught sight of Mr. Converse, who was hurrying toward the cars.

With a hasty impulse the boy followed. But he found himself checked at the gate by the sharp demand for "Tickets!"

"Ain't had time to get one," he averred. "I'll pay aboard."

"That won't do, young man! Nobody goes through this gate without a ticket."

"Iron-clad, is it?" asked Frank. "How soon does the train go?"

"Yander it goes now." The train began to move at that moment. "You'll have to wait for the next."

"And I'd been aboard it if you hadn't been so thundering big and busy," growled Frank, with a pretense of anger. "See here, Mr. Julius Caesar, you've robbed me of a cool hundred thousand by cutting me off from my train, and I'll sue your old road for that amount."

"That's right, Mr. Snip-snap! Let yourself loose," answered the official. "There pulls a freight train out; maybe you'd best travel by that, if you're in a hurry."

"By jiminy, I will!" exclaimed Frank, with a sudden resolution. "Good-by. I'll let up on your old railroad this time."

He darted through the gate before the surprised official could close it, ran at full speed after the moving train, and climbed agilely to the narrow platform of the rear car, while the gate-keeper stood looking after him.

"Spry as a squirrel," he said. "Confound his impudence! I'd like to see him break a bone!"

Frank was off for Louisville by a very slow route. But, every step on his long journey counted, and he was bound to take advantage of every opportunity to make his way North.

The bumper of a freight car, however, offered no very agreeable seat, and he quickly climbed the short ladder leading to the roof, and stretched himself there at full length.

The train dragged along on the trail of the flying Express that was carrying north the two men in whom he was so deeply interested. It seemed like the old story of the tortoise and the

hare—only in this case the hare was not likely to fall asleep till the tortoise overtook it.

Out through the streets of the city, and on between the low-lying country-seats and plantations moved the slow train, creeping onward mile after mile through the Louisiana lowlands.

Frank before long grew tired of the car-roof, and started along the train on a journey of exploration. None of the train hands were visible, and after crossing two or three cars he came upon a platform-car loaded with lumber.

He climbed down to this, and found a comfortable seat on the boards, under the warm southland sun, where he sat for miles enjoying the beauty of the tropical scenery.

He was at length disturbed in his repose by a sharp exclamation. Looking up, he saw a man gazing down on him from the roof of the adjoining car.

"Hillo, tramp!" cried this train hand "what the thunder are you doin' there?"

"Traveling," answered Frank.

"Stealing a ride, are you? That won't do, young fellow. It's ag'in the rules. You'll have to hop off at the next stop."

"Ain't goin' to be hard on a fellow, are you?" queried Frank. "I got left on the Express, and the president of the road gave me a free pass on this lightning grasshopper."

"The deuce he did!" cried the man, with a laugh. "You're a smart coon."

"See here, old chap, come down here and let's have some chin-music," suggested Frank. "You've got nothing to do and I'm full of bottled-up talk."

The train-hand laughingly followed this suggestion, and Frank soon got so on his right side that nothing more was said about his leaving the train.

He slept that night stretched in a narrow valley between two hills of planks, while the train now dragged slowly onward, now rested at a siding for a passenger-train to rush by.

We cannot go further through the details of this long journey. It will suffice to say that Frank in due time reached the city of Nashville, at which point the freight ceased its journey northward.

By this time the young traveler had enough of that style of progress. He left Nashville on a passenger-train, going as far north as a dollar's worth of ticket would carry him. From that point he tried his former tactics—of traveling without a ticket.

He was less fortunate in this than before. Three times he was put off of trains, and once had to foot it over ten miles of Kentucky high-road to reach the next station. But impudence and energy carried him through, and in little more than a week after leaving New Orleans the resolute boy walked into Louisville. He had been left by an angry conductor at a station six miles back, and made this last section of his journey partly in a mule-team and partly on foot.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EYE-OPENER.

THE end of the difficult enterprise of Detective Frank seemed near at hand. He had, after a long and adventurous journey, tracked the conspirators to the city in which their scheme was finally to be put into effect. And he had learned much about the character of this scheme.

He was sharp enough to perceive that the method of making cheap aluminum was a rascally fraud, designed to draw a number of rich dupes into a dangerous trap.

But just how the pair of villains proposed to deal with their dupes Frank was very much in the dark. This was the final stage in his enterprise, and this he now proposed to investigate.

Of two important things he was sure. He had discovered the Artful Dodger, a gentleman who was badly wanted by the prison authorities of New York. And he had learned that Converse was playing a game of fraud on his creditors, and had run away with fifty thousand dollars of their money.

"That's enough to pay for my trip, if I stop there," said Frank. "But I ain't going to stop there. The Artful robbed me like a footpad, and I'm going to lay him out if it's in the wood. Wonder if Dick Wister's here yet? I want him bad just now."

This, at least, could be found out easily. Frank had wired him to the principal hotel in Louisville. Finding, by inquiry, the name and situation of this hotel, he made his way thither, and asked the clerk if they had a guest of the name of Richard Wister.

"Nobody here of that name," was the answer.

"He was to be here this week. Maybe he has wired? Have you received a telegraph message for Frank Melton?"

"Is that your name?"

"Yes."

"Where from?"

"New York."

"I have a letter for you, then. It came here two days ago."

"That's better," said Frank, with satisfaction. "Let's have it."

The clerk handed him the epistle in question. Seating himself on the nearest chair, Frank opened and read it. It was, as he supposed, from Dick Wister, and ran as follows:

"DEAR FRANK:—

"I thought to start two days ago, in response to your telegram, but an awkward bit of work has stopped me, and I cannot get away for several days yet. You are somewhat chary of your communications, young fellow. Paper and ink don't cost much, and you might have let me know more about your jump over the United States. But I take it for granted that you don't wire me to Louisville without wanting me bad, and I shall try and be there by the 25th. Keep your peach till I come. Don't try your own teeth on it too rashly.

"Yours,

"RICH'D WISTER."

"What day of the month is this?" Frank asked the clerk.

"Twenty-third."

"Thank you.—Two days to wait, then," he said to himself. "It's mighty easy for Dick to talk, but I'm not sure I can keep my teeth out of the peach that long."

It was still early in the day. Frank was hungry. His available funds now amounted to the small sum of one dollar and a half, his journey having consumed the balance.

His first task, then, was to get the cheapest meal that he could find in Louisville. His second was to scout that city from end to end in search of the two men whom he had followed so far.

The day passed on until night was near at hand. By this time he was foot-sore and disappointed. He had traversed many miles of the city streets, visited every hotel, and tried every means he could think of to discover the Artful Dodger and his confederate, but without result.

It was not only these two he sought. There were three others—the Chicago, the St. Louis, and the New Orleans speculators in aluminum—but none of these either had he seen.

The time was up in which they had engaged to be in Louisville, and he was sure they must be there, but he looked for them in vain.

That day's work had not panned out well. It was near night. He had come to a halt in front of a small grocery store in the edge of the city, where he sat on a box munching slowly at some biscuits which he had purchased from the proprietor.

"Don't know where I'm to roost to night," he grumbled. "It's colder here than in New Orleans, and a fellow might get the shivers in an outdoor plank bed. But, I've got to stretch what cash I've got left like India rubber. If I only—Hello!—by Jiminy, I clear forgot him!"

This exclamation was called forth by the sight of a person who just then came into view of the munching boy. He recognized him at sight.

It was the form of Mr. Palmer, his recent railroad and steamboat traveling acquaintance.

"What made me forget he was in the deal, and was coming to Louisville?" exclaimed Frank, cheerily. "Shall I—No, I must keep shady, and take up his trail. It's the biggest bit of luck out for him to turn up just when everything had gone wrong."

As he thus communed with himself Mr. Palmer approached. When he came opposite Frank, the boy's face was so hidden by hand and biscuit that only the eyes were visible. The Westerner passed on without noticing him.

Frank sat still till he was fifty yards in advance. Then he sprang from his seat and put himself in pursuit.

The journey continued until the March twilight had faded out from the sky, and darkness was rapidly coming on.

Now, not far before them, there became visible a large house, surrounded with a considerable space of ground, around which ran a wall.

It stood well outside the city, on a road leading eastward, and looked like the suburban mansion of some well-to-do resident.

When Mr. Palmer came near this house he stopped and looked around him, as if to make sure of his surroundings. A short inspection seemed to satisfy him, and he then stepped toward the gate that opened through the front wall.

He had laid his hand on the gate to open it, when his attention was called by a low whistle. He turned to see whence it came.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Palmer," came a voice of greeting.

Palmer looked toward the youthful figure which loomed up through the gathering shadows.

"Who the deuce are you that's got me down so pat?" he demanded.

"Ain't forgot the boy that done the conductor, have you?"

"What's that? It ain't—"

"What's the price of five-cent aluminum?" asked Frank, with a laugh.

"Dashed if it ain't him! Shoot me if I ain't blazing glad to see you. But what brings you here?"

"Been trailing you," was the answer.

"Trailing me? What for?"

"To keep you from running your head into so deep a hole that you'd only have your heels to talk with."

"By the Rocky Mountains, boy, what are you getting through you?"

"You helped me out of a scrape once, Mr. Palmer, and I want to help you out of one now. Come this way, I want to talk with you."

Palmer hesitated a minute, and then turned and walked toward the city, side by side with Frank.

"Mighty glad to see you, young man. But—"

"Is that the aluminum factory?" interrupted Frank.

"That's a little secret. But—"

"But not from me. It's only tit for tat, Mr. Palmer, for I'm going to let you into a much bigger secret."

"What's that?" asked Palmer sharply.

"It's this. You're dealing with a pair of the sharpest rogues on this side the Atlantic. As for their making cheap metal, they'll just as soon make chalk out of cheese. They're in for making money, but it's to go from your pocket into theirs.—You haven't put any up yet?"

"That ain't our way out West. We want to see before we deal. I am to see the plant and the whole process to-night, and not put up a penny till I'm satisfied."

"That's the shape of the dodge, is it? Mr. Palmer, I owe you one, and I'm going to pay you. Can I trust you to keep a still tongue if I let you into a deep secret?"

"You can, youngster. Pile in."

Frank had a highly interested auditor for the next half-hour, during which time he told his companion the whole story of what he knew about Clarkson and Converse, and of his adventures in pursuit of the latter.

When he reached the termination of his story, Palmer, who had scarcely spoken a word, gave vent to an exclamation of astonishment.

"By the Rocky Mountains, boy, if this is all Gospel, you've struck very deep oil. When did you say that detective'd be here?"

"Day after to-morrow."

"I'd like to see him amazing."

"I've told you my story. Now tell me yours. I want to know how these rascals have played their game."

"They've been corresponding with me for some time," answered Palmer. "I'm pretty well-known to have made my pile, and they made me an offer of twenty per cent. of the shares in the aluminum process for one hundred thousand. They had three others for the same amount, and were to put up fifty thousand themselves, and keep the same number of shares."

"They've done that, too. Hill, as he called himself, saw me in Chicago, and showed me proof that he had that much in deposit in that city. You've heard now about the whole story. I am here to see the process. It's a dead secret yet, and that's why that out-of-town house is used."

"You haven't brought the money with you?"

"Some securities only. But they're not to be produced till I am satisfied."

"And didn't it strike you that to go to a lonely house, after dark, with securities in your pocket wasn't a very secure business?"

"Why, hang it, I don't know but you're right! But I never dreamed of anything wrong."

"Come with me, Mr. Palmer. I'm a good deal younger than you, but I'm older in the ways of

rogues. I want you to go to that house—and I'm going with you. But you'd best leave your securities behind."

To this sensible advice Palmer made no objection, and Frank led the way to the hotel at which he had received Dick Wister's letter.

Here he wrote a note to Dick, detailing the very important information he had gained, and laying down the locality of the house so that it could not be mistaken. In conclusion he remarked:

"The peach is so ripe that I've got to bite it before it spoils. I'm going into that den to-night. If you don't find me when you arrive, look for me there sharp, for I may be in trouble."

"FRANK."

This note he sealed and directed. He then gave it to the clerk, asking him to be sure and deliver it to Mr. Wister as soon as he arrived.

Mr. Palmer now, at Frank's suggestion, left his securities with the clerk, to be deposited in the hotel safe. This done, the two left the hotel together.

It was about nine o'clock when they again reached the vicinity of the lonely house. But, Frank was not the Frank of an hour before. He had, with an art he had learned from Dick Wister, changed his face from its usual florid appearance to a creole-like darkness. He had also, at Mr. Palmer's expense, attired himself in a new suit of clothes very different from those he had lately worn.

He now posed as Mr. Palmer's nephew, who had accompanied him from Chicago; and when the man was admitted to the house, the boy entered with him, trusting that his disguise and his coming with Mr. Palmer, would throw the sharp-eyed villains they had to deal with off the track.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ALUMINUM PLANT.

"I AM sorry to say, Mr. Palmer, that our chemist was taken very ill this afternoon, and we have had to stop operations for to-night. Otherwise we could have shown you the plant at work. But, if you want to do your eyes good, look at that!"

It was Mr. Converse who spoke, and he pointed to a heap of ingots of a silvery white metal, which lay on a table before him. They were in a room in the lonely house already spoken of.

"Aluminum?" asked Palmer.

"That there's no need to say. Feel the weight of it and judge for yourself."

Palmer picked up one of the ingots, which weighed no more than a piece of fine wood of the same size.

"That's the sort of stuff we're bringing out," remarked Converse. "All we want is the cash to extend our operations from a small to a large scale. The thing is a success, and we can make it by the ton as easily as by the pound—if we have the plant. Brown, Johnson, and Gordon have all caught on, and you have the refusal of the remaining shares. And, to tell the truth, Mr. Palmer, I would rather have you back out than come in. We have capital enough as it is."

"Back out? Not much," replied Palmer. "If it's as you say, I'm not so green as that. Prove your word and I'm your man."

"That's business. But it must be cash down. We're taking no credit entries. Have you brought the needful?"

"Not in the shape of cash. But I have securities which can easily be converted, if I take on."

"With you?"

"Near enough to lay my hands on them at an hour's notice."

An imperceptible change came over Converse's face, not noticed by Palmer, but which did not escape the sharp eyes of Frank Melton, who sat listening to this conversation.

"My nephew here knows where they are, and can obtain them on my order," continued Palmer. "I came here ready to deal, you see, Mr. Hill. I don't intend to draw out, or let you out."

"And this fine boy is your nephew? I am glad you brought him along. I like to see young men brought up in business habits."

It was Mr. Clarkson who spoke. He had entered the room at that moment, and fixed his eyes on the face of Frank, who sat somewhat in the shadow.

"Yes," answered Palmer. "I have no time to attend to this business, and wish him to take my place in it."

"Very good, very good. Your hand, young man. I am happy to welcome you as one of us."

He fairly beamed on Frank as he shook his

hand. But a cold shudder went through the boy's frame. There seemed to him something of the hiss of a snake in that smooth tone, and a snaky coldness in the touch of that hand.

"Does he know me?" Frank asked himself. "Hang his gimlet-eyes, I'm afraid he does. And if he does, I'm in a deuce of a tight place."

Whether the Artful Dodger had seen through the boy's disguise or not, he certainly paid no further attention to him, but seated himself and entered into an earnest conversation with the two men.

The subject of their talk was aluminum, and the whole process of making it was described to Palmer, who appeared to drink it in with eager ears.

"Eleven o'clock," at length said Mr. Converse, looking at his watch. "How time flies! But there's no need for you to go back to your hotel to-night, Mr. Palmer. We have plenty of accommodation here, both for you and your nephew."

"I don't want to impose on good nature."

"Which there's no danger of. And as we expect to start in early to-morrow, it will be an advantage to have you on the ground."

Mr. Palmer, warned by a wink from Frank, made no further objections, and the two, shortly after, were shown to rooms on the third floor of the building, where they were bidden "Good-night."

The brace of villainous conspirators descended the stairs together, neither speaking till they had entered the room they had recently left.

Converse then turned to his partner with a look of satisfaction.

"That fills the bill," he said. "The other three are ready to come to terms, and I fancy two or three days of our process will bring the money from Palmer. Then we have only to realize and put out."

"You think so?" queried Clarkson, in a satirical tone.

"What do you mean?" asked Converse, looking at him sharply.

"I mean that we have barely escaped being put in a hole, and that we've got to play our cards skillfully, or we're in for it yet."

"I don't catch on to your meaning."

"Hang his young hide! we were idiots not to put an end to him before we left New Orleans," growled Clarkson. "But how he got off, and how he scented us here—"

"He?—Who?—What are you talking about?" cried Converse, in astonishment.

"That confounded young fox. Where were your eyes, Jack? He had stained his face and sat in the shadow, but I knew him at a glance."

"Do you mean that Palmer's nephew is the young fellow we left locked up at New Orleans?"

"The same; and no more Palmer's nephew than you are. How he got away and tracked us here—"

"Then Palmer is on it, and we're in a mess!" interrupted Converse nervously. "But he gave no show of it. And why did he consent to stay here?"

"I like that least of all," answered Clarkson. "I caught the boy's wink to him. They're not afraid to stay here, and that indicates that they have laid plans for a rescue, if necessary. We have not a day to spare, Jack. We must push matters and realize."

"Good heavens! are we in danger of a failure after all our careful work? That young hound—"

"Will not get away from here alive. I'll settle him, if all else goes by the board," cried Clarkson savagely.

"We must work to-night," exclaimed Converse, starting up sharply. "First, to make sure of our new prisoners. Then, for the others."

He hastily ascended the stairs, to the rooms which had been assigned to their new guests.

Reaching Palmer's room he stopped to listen. Sounds could be heard inside as if the inmate was preparing for bed. There were strong bolts on the door at top and bottom. These he slipped slyly into their sockets, with an air of satisfaction.

"One," he said, in a low tone.

He next proceeded to the room occupied by Frank. From this no sounds came. The boy seemed to have lost no time in getting to bed. Converse carefully turned the latch-handle and pushed. The door failed to yield.

"He has locked himself in," he said. "Very good; I'll try to make him safer." He slipped the two bolts, which were on this door also.

"Now, my spry young ferret, I think we have you. But it's lucky for both of us that Clarkson has such marvelous quick eyes. He's a wonder that way."

He turned away with a look of triumph. Their two foes were secured, and they had time to work.

Had he known all his triumph would have been much less decided. Frank Melton was not the boy to trust to chances. His door was locked, it is true, but it was a wrong deduction from that that he was locked in. On the contrary, he was locked out.

The villains, shrewd as they were, had committed an error in leaving their young guest uncared-for even for five minutes. Clarkson fancied that he had shut the boy's eyes by his suave manner. In truth, he had overplayed his part, and the shrewd young detective knew well that his disguise had been seen through.

Hardly, therefore, had his hosts left the door before he extracted the key from the lock, stepped outside, and locked the door from without.

"Maybe I'm something of a fool; but I ain't much of a gudgeon," he said to himself. "If the Artful Dodger buys this coon for a mutton-head, he's off his eggs amazing. Now to hunt out a hiding-place."

He slipped away with noiseless footsteps.

It was not until evening of the next day that a visit was made to the boy's room. Secure in their belief that he was safely entrapped, the conspirators had left him there while they finished their other work. They had certain things to do that day, but had no intention of leaving the house till Frank Melton's case had been fully attended to.

They were somewhat too secure in their ideas. Frank had been very busily at work in the interval, and was now in possession of some important and curious secrets.

With the aid of a pair of old rubber overshoes, which he had found, he was enabled to traverse every portion of the house without a sound. Fortunately for him, the building seemed to be in sole possession of the two confederates, and he had no great difficulty in keeping out of their sight.

What he learned was that it had other inmates. In addition to the two rooms which he and Palmer had occupied there was a row of other apartments on the third floor, each provided with strong outside bolts to the doors.

Three of these rooms he occupied. This he learned partly by listening at their doors, partly by overhearing the conversation of the two villains.

He learned more than this. He discovered that the three prisoners were the capitalists whom he had already seen in Chicago, St. Louis and New Orleans—Messrs. Johnson, Gordon, and Brown, and that a very effective method was being pursued to make them yield their securities.

In short, they were being starved into compliance! In three days neither of them had received a morsel of food nor a drop of water! The result was what might have been expected. They had all yielded to the torture of starvation, and made over to their captors papers which would enable them to secure the money set aside for investment in the aluminum project.

This accomplished, the scoundrels had still Palmer and his assumed nephew to deal with.

Little did they dream where this nephew was, at that moment!

Elated with the important information he had gained, Frank had left the house by a rear window, and made his way into the city. Here he had called and made inquiry at the hotel.

The clerk handed him a telegram which had been received several hours before. It was from Dick Wister, and stated that he was on his way to Louisville, which he hoped to reach by that evening, but might be delayed till the next morning.

Frank sat down and wrote him a short note, stating briefly what he had learned. This he left with the clerk.

Leaving the hotel he strolled in the direction of the lonely house. He was in doubt whether he had not best await Dick's arrival. Yet Palmer might be in danger, and might need aid.

The boy questioned himself whether he had not better inform the Louisville police of his discoveries, and have the house raided. Yet he hardly cared to give up the credit of his useful labors, and rob Dick Wister of the chance of having a hand in the settlement of that dark affair.

As he thus cogitated, he drew nearer and nearer to the lonely mansion. His feet seemed

drawn thither by some strong attraction. It was near sunset when he reached its vicinity. Should he enter it again, or go back and wait for Dick?

His safety from discovery that day gave him courage. He leaped the wall that surrounded the grounds at a low place in the rear, and carefully approached the house.

All seemed still. Not a sound reached his ears, nor a sign of life was visible to his eyes. A minute brought him under the window through which he had left the house a few hours before.

There was a low bench from which he could easily reach it. The attraction was too great for the prudence of the adventurous boy. He stepped on to the bench, lifted the sash, and sprang lightly into the room.

But hardly had his feet touched the floor when a blow fell upon his head that hurled him prostrate and nearly senseless, while a triumphant voice exclaimed:

"We have him now! The fox has turned goose and trusted himself again within our clutches. By all that's good, we've a long score to settle with him, and will pay it off to the last farthing!"

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

THE blow which Frank had received had been dealt with terrible vigor. His dazed senses soon lapsed into insensibility, and for an hour or more he lay like one dead.

When he at length recovered, he found himself in a dark room in which silence reigned supreme. His head ached severely, and he felt a sharp pain at the point where he had been struck.

He sought to lift his hand to his head, but it would not come. He now discovered that both hands were firmly bound, a rope being wrapped closely round his body and arms.

His next effort was to rise to his feet—but with the same result. Feet and legs were as firmly bound as hands and arms. His captors had evidently determined that he should not escape this time, and had made him as secure as could be done with ropes.

An hour passed, during which not a sound nor a ray of light came to the young prisoner. At the end of that time he heard footsteps and voices without.

Just what was intended to be done with him he could not guess, but he thought it safest to feign to be still insensible. As the door opened, and a ray of light shot into the darkened room, he closed his eyes and brought himself to a studied lifelessness of appearance.

"Not come to yet," exclaimed a voice which he recognized as that of Clarkson. "You hit hard, Jack."

"I generally do," answered Converse. "How if we were to let this insensibility merge into death? An open vein will do it. We are not safe while that boy lives."

"I don't like it," replied Converse. "I can go my distance, but murder is a step beyond me."

"Squeamish, are you?" exclaimed Clarkson, in tones of contempt. "A dead boy is no more to me than a dead puppy. We have our work done. In a day more we will be rich. But I tell you, if we leave this boy alive behind us, he will spoil our plans yet. I am getting to be a fatalist about this young hound. He is my evil genius."

"Don't kill him," pleaded Converse. "Put out his eyes, if you will. That will end his spying. But don't kill him."

"Why, confound you, which is the worst—to kill a man or to blind him? To put him in torture for years, or to end him in a minute? Put out his eyes? No, no, I can't do that! My plan is the most merciful."

"Well, do as you please. But don't ask me."

Several minutes passed. No more words were spoken, but there were sounds of moving about the room, as if the cold-hearted villains were preparing for their bloody work.

A cold shiver ran through the boy's frame. Great drops of sweat stood upon his brow. Was this to be the end of his career? Oh, why had he ventured here? Where was Dick Wister?

Yet, despite his nervous dread, he brought all his resolution to bear to retain an appearance of lifelessness. He feared that if he should show signs of recovery, his ruthless enemies might do him some greater injury.

In a few minutes more the boy felt a strong hand seize his arm.

"The rope is in the way," came an impatient voice.

"Cut the sleeve."

"Ay, that will do it."

He now heard a ripping sound, as a sharp blade severed the strong cloth of his coat-sleeve.

Next came a sensation of cold upon his arm. The sleeve had been thrown back and the bare flesh exposed. A cold hand grasped the arm firmly below the elbow. A shudder ran through the boy's frame, despite his efforts to repress it.

"Is it done?" asked Converse.

"It soon will be."

As this answer was given, Frank felt a sharp sensation of pain, followed by a feeling as of warm water flowing over his arm.

"The blood runs freely," said Clarkson, with an air of satisfaction. "In half an hour the boy will be as dead as a door-nail. Thank the stars, we're free from all danger from him."

"Let us go, then. Minutes are precious now," answered Converse.

Frank had never needed as much resolution as he did at that moment. He felt his warm life-blood flowing from an open vein, and knew that he would surely bleed to death unless help came soon. Yet he dared not show signs of life to these heartless villains. They had spoken of putting out his eyes. They might do it should he open them.

With all his energy he held back every sign of life, and forced himself to lie as motionless as a corpse.

"You are right; we must make all haste," said Clarkson. "If these men should be rescued before we finish our work, all our labor will be for nothing."

"If they be not rescued?" queried Converse.

"Then this boy will have four dead men to keep him company."

The next moment they were gone and Frank was left alone. The door closed sharply behind them. It seemed to him like his death-knell. He opened his eyes and for the first time breathed freely. All was dark around him. He strove earnestly to break the bonds that confined him, but they failed to yield.

Still came that warm flow trickling down his bared arm. With it there came to his ears a pattering sound, as of drops falling in rapid succession to the floor. He knew too well what it meant—his life was ebbing away in those falling drops.

Years seemed to pass over his head in the next few minutes. Unless help came quickly, his last hope of life was gone.

Help? where would it come from? who would bring it? There were others in the house, but they were all starving prisoners. With the going of the two villains he would be left alone to die.

His voice was left him; should he call for help? To what purpose?—it was impossible that his voice could reach the ears of rescuers. It might but recall his ruthless foes to complete their devilish work.

He strove to press the open vein against his body, and thus stop the flow of blood. The effort was in vain. The bonds held him too tightly.

A shuddering horror shook his every limb. What should he do? Must he lie there helpless and bleed to death like a stuck pig?

As a last resort he rolled over on the floor, and in doing so brought his arm under him. It was a fortunate movement; the cut vein was pressed against a slight ridge in the floor, and the flow was partly checked.

If he could keep this position, it would delay the inevitable result. But it would be only a delay. Unless help came, death was certain.

Five minutes of this slow torture passed away. They seemed to him five hours. He could still feel the trickling blood, and despair was taking the place of hope in his heart.

To die so young! with life so full of hope before him! To die and leave his work undone! It was more than his strained nerves could bear.

Suddenly from his lips there came an involuntary shriek of despair, that rung like a ghostly yell through the silent apartments of that lonely house.

Had his voice been a bugle-call to arms, it could not have brought a more quick and stirring response.

While its echoes were still vibrating through room and corridor there came a sudden uproar of voices without, followed by the sound of

trampling feet, and the dull thud of what seemed blows.

The boy listened intently, while new hope surged through his frame.

"Yield!" came a stern voice. "Yield, or it will be worse for you!"

Frank started and strained at his bonds. The voice was as familiar to him as his own.

"It's Dick!" he cried, joyfully. "Dick! Dick Wister! Come here quick, or your blooming 'prentice will be deader than cold turkey."

There was an instant's silence, then a voice of inquiry:

"Where are you?"

"Here. This way."

An instant more, and then the door was flung open with a surge, and an agile form bounded into the room. The light of a lamp in the hall without illuminated the apartment.

The new-comer sprung toward the fettered boy. It was the well-known form of Dick Wister!

"Tied, are you?" he asked, as he drew a knife.

"And bleeding to death," answered Frank. "Them hounds cut open a vein in my arm, and left me here to die."

"The wretches!" exclaimed Dick, as he severed the boy's bonds with slash after slash of the sharp blade. "The murderous villains! Up with you, Frank, we'll soon stop that."

As he spoke there came from without a fierce oath, and the sound of a falling body, instantly followed by the noise of flight and pursuit.

Dick turned on his heel and with one dash was through the door, leaving Frank to stanch the blood as he best could.

"What is it?" came in the voice of the detective. "Where's Clarkson? Where's the Dodger?"

"Gone!" was the reply. "He broke from Jones there, knifed him, and made tracks."

"The deuce!" came Dick's sharp tones. "What were you doing? He must not escape."

Frank, pressing firmly with the fingers of his right hand the bleeding vein on his left arm, rushed to the door, just in time to see Dick Wister plunging down the stairs in fierce pursuit.

Before him stood a group of men. Two stout fellows held Converse prisoner despite his efforts to escape from their hands. A third lay bleeding on the floor. The Artful Dodger had disabled him with a sudden knife-thrust, and fled.

In five minutes afterward Dick returned, with a look of chagrin on his face.

"He has given me the slip," he stated. "The darkness favored him. He must be caught, if the whole country has to be raised. We've got one of them, at any rate. Lock him in that room till we want him. Now let's see about this fellow, who has got paid well for not keeping his eyes open."

He bent over the fallen man, and examined his wound.

"Get up!" he cried, sharply. "It's only a flesh-cut. You're not hurt. Haven't got half what you deserved for letting go of the sharpest rogue in the United States."

The fellow rose to his feet with a shamefaced look.

"And now, Frank," continued Dick, turning to the boy. "I got to Louisville just in time, it seems; found your note at the hotel, raised these men, and came here. What have you to say?"

"That I'd been a dead boy if you'd come a half-hour later. The hounds tied me fast, cut a vein in my arm, and left me to bleed to death."

"By Jove, it's lucky I came! We'll soon stop that. But, what's all this uproar?"

During the last words their voices had been drowned by a loud knocking on the doors of the adjoining rooms. These were now followed by calls for release.

"Them's the rest of them," explained Frank. "Slip the bolts on the doors there, and you'll see."

The Louisville constables hastened to obey, and from four rooms came four woe-begone individuals. Mr. Palmer, who came first, seemed little the worse for his detention, but the others looked the picture of starvation.

"Are these the men you spoke of?" asked Dick.

"Yes," answered Frank. "They have been lured here on false pretenses, locked up one after another, and starved into giving these thundering rascals what they wanted."

Closer inquiry proved the truth of Frank's

words. Each of the men had come there prepared to take shares in the aluminum cheap process if it proved satisfactory, had been lured into prison, and been forced by starvation into giving papers to their villainous captors that would enable them to raise several hundred thousand dollars.

"Are these some of them?" asked one of the constables, exhibiting a handful of folded documents.

These were eagerly opened by the released dupes.

"Yes; they are ours," cried Johnson and Gordon. "Where did you get them?"

"Then the fellow who escaped must have mine," exclaimed Brown. "We must telegraph to New Orleans at once and head him off."

"You can save your powder," answered Dick. "The Artful Dodger isn't quite a fool. Hang him! he has given us the slip again; but I'll have him if it's in the wood."

It was not in the wood, as it proved. Every effort was made to recapture the escaped rogue, but in vain. The police of all the cities of the West were put on the *qui vive*, yet despite their utmost efforts the Artful Dodger remained at liberty.

A second time he had slipped through the hands of justice, and was free to repeat his schemes of villainy.

Dick Wister returned to New York with such satisfaction as the possession of one prisoner could give him, and after having arranged that the fifty thousand dollars in the Chicago bank should be held until the creditors of Jacob P. Converse could prove their claims.

Frank accompanied him, very much choppfallen. That Clarkson had escaped, after all his efforts, was a bitter pill for the ambitious young detective to swallow, and he repeated to himself at every mile of the road:

"I will have him yet. I will round him up if I have to give my life to the work."

In truth the young detective had no occasion to feel depressed, but very much to feel elated with his work. He had run down the man on whose track he had been placed, discovered the great aluminum fraud, and saved all the intended victims from loss, alike the New York creditors and the Western capitalists.

These parties certainly appreciated his services, for between them all they made up a purse of ten thousand dollars, which was placed to his credit in a New York bank. Nearly half of this came from Palmer, whose admiration of and thankfulness to the boy were unbounded.

Yet this large sum gave less satisfaction to the young detective than a few words of praise from Dick Wister.

"It is well for all these people that I sent you on Converse's track instead of going myself," he said. "You have done your work far better than I could have done. If you keep on as you have begun, Frank Melton, you will yet be hailed as the Vidocq of the New York Police."

"Just you save your taffy," answered the boy, though his heart throbbed with proud exultation. "I'm not worth a spoiled oyster while the Artful Dodger keeps loose. When I run him down, then you can blow. And I'm going to run him down, if there's the right stuff in my corporation."

And Detective Frank set his lips with a firmness that showed that he meant business.

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